

Elysium

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Elysium

by [drinkbloodlikewine](#), [whiskeyandspite](#)

Summary

There was a reason there's no knowledge of secret police in London.

Secret is, after all, the operative word.

Based in the 1870-1880 era, London, Will Graham is directed by a mutual contact to meet with one Hannibal Lecter, a man deeply embedded in one of the most lucrative opium rings in London run by one Mason Verger. He is told to infiltrate and shed light on the goings on within. No other orders are given.

A Victorian Spy AU.

Notes

There is a lot of violence, there is a lot of drug use, there is also a lot of material within that will be triggering. We will set individual warnings per chapter and recommend you skip those that upset you. Mason Verger is a sick bastard, please remember that. A lot comes up later that brings that to the surface and then some.

Also, this is a spy AU, spies notoriously have a very shaky concept of both trust and truth. Take everything you read with a grain of salt. Then a shot of tequila and a sip of lime, to help.

Trust us.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Will drums his fingers against his thigh. A staccato rhythm, to follow the click of wheels over cobblestones, but too uneven to match. Relatively few people in the streets, lamplight flickering bright reflections against the dark wet ground, illuminating the rain like falling embers as water cascades off the roof under which Will waits.

Not where he wished to find himself tonight, so close to areas with alleys narrow enough to not spread your arms, but not so much that they don't hold countless threats against your person. Areas with tolls to pay at every corner and tugs at his coat and voices, pressing, shouting, calling to him from every overcrowded tenement and every street corner.

Areas that he knows far too well already, forcing a breath to loosen the pressure on his chest.

He checks down either side of the narrow street, looks for shadows emerging from either bend, and satisfied to see none, glances towards his pocket watch.

7:30 precisely.

He shoulders into the heavy door behind him, and lets it slide shut behind to keep the heat in and the rain out. There isn't a look spared towards him from any but the proprietor behind the bar, a nod exchanged there. There is little more inside than the bar itself and a few tables, scarcely occupied despite the poor weather they've had the last week, murmured conversation into cups by two men seated at the chipped and water-bent bar. Another nod from the barkeep, directional this time, and Will's eyes follow his gesture towards the back room.

"Thank you," murmured as he passes, leaving a tip on the counter. He unshoulders his frockcoat, grey and heavy and rich with the smell of wet wool, and shakes the water from the curls of his hair as he closes the door behind him.

Darker in here than the main bar, but easy enough to see. Two tables crammed into the space that usually groan under the weight of the men leaning against them, of the women that join some of them to slick themselves against their shoulders in hope of a bed for the night and a tip for the morning.

One table for cards, the other for dice, both empty now save for one man carefully laying out a hand of Patience on the worn velvet cloth.

He doesn't look up but Will knows his presence has been noted.

His hands are rough, worker's hands, or someone who isn't afraid to get them dirty. Scars on the knuckles, perhaps a fan of the brass knuckles that are favored so often on the streets that cause more damage to the wearer than the victim they meet. Perhaps just a rough man, unworked edges and short temper.

He shuffles the cards and sets them aside, turning over the first, starting to slowly work through the game.

"You're on time," he says at last.

"When it's important," Will responds, "and the rain doesn't delay. It did, of course. I endeavored to be here before you." A hint of amusement at the thought, before he adds with the requisite English solemnity. "Dreadful weather."

A pique of nerves, removing his gloves one at a time to slide them into the pocket of his coat, and hang it on the wall. The accent is Russian, perhaps, or something near enough to it - unusual enough that Will's surprised he recognizes it at all.

He takes in a little more of him, still sliding cards from the deck to the rows. Big shoulders, a laborer once if not presently, and an affectation of disinterest, of distance, well-practiced enough that it's hard to read more in it. A hard jaw, set, dark eyes and thoughtful clothing - neither underdressed, for this side of the district, nor overdressed considering it. A simple cotton shirt with horn buttons, sepia sack coat set aside, tie loosened a little.

Malleable, into a slightly higher class - and then reading as a bit disheveled - or slightly lower - a floor overseer, perhaps, rather than a worker.

Clever.

"William," he interjects into his own thoughts, and offers a hand. "Will is fine."

The man's lips quirk barely at the mention of the rain, and he turns over three more cards before pushing the chair back and standing to take Will's hand properly.

"Hannibal," he tells him. He does not give a surname.

"Punctuality says a lot about a man, Will. I must say I am happier to see you on time than late. I would not have been here had you been delayed but five minutes more." A smile, then, genuine, though tired. "And I'm afraid you will never be at a place before me. Though you can try."

He lets Will's hand go and sits at the table once more, hands back to turn the deck and begin the slow layout again. He gestures the younger man sit.

"I apologise for my inability to offer you a drink. Nothing at this establishment is something I would feel comfortable serving a friend." A thin smile at the irony of the statement. "Though I doubt we will be here long enough for you to fault me fully for my lack of social graces in that regard."

He sweeps the cards together, suddenly, forgoing his game, and shuffles the deck between deft fingers, eyes, dark and somehow reddish in the dim room, sheltered behind round glasses, surprisingly clean.

"Friends already - we are efficient," Will responds, amused. "I don't partake with any regularity, certainly not while working, but I appreciate the offer. If you would like to

indulge, they serve us only unaltered drinks when we're here, so you needn't worry."

He quiets his chatter, pursing his lips together into a thin line, pressing them out again, and settling neatly into the chair across from Hannibal and his cards, watching them rather than him.

"You'll forgive my lack of social graces equally, I hope," Will sighs, smoothing a hand down the lines of his dark plaid waistcoat, the chambray shirt beneath, and resting it there against his stomach. "Our mutual acquaintance has told me that you may be of some help to us."

The cards flutter in the relative quiet, the only sound between the slight creak of floorboards as Will adjusts in his chair and the rain still drumming against the crown glass. He watches it for a moment, the water rushing over the curved panes, and wonders if the river could rise so high as to wash away everything and leave the city entirely submerged.

It would feel much as this, he imagines. Slowly drowning.

"Will."

He blinks, turning wide blue eyes back to the man across from him. "Beg pardon," he sighs, sitting forward, forcing himself to a position of attentiveness. "I haven't slept in several days. Dreadful weather. Has he spoken to you, then, about the nature of this call?"

The blink is returned, the cards tapped briefly against the tabletop before Hannibal starts to deal. One card apiece, one after another, over and over. He keeps his eyes on Will when he talks.

"I can be of help only in opening the door for you, holding your hand within the den after is dangerous for both of us," he responds carefully.

The last card gets turned face-up between them. A game of Whist between two, rather than four.

"I have been within for several months, they do not trust easily with information. The underground runs on the only efficient system of trade," he shrugs, amused as he sorts the cards in his own hand, eyes flicked down as he does. "Barter. Information for information, money for money. Grease one palm and make sure you throw the rag you wipe yours on somewhere no one can find, and set it alight."

Will listens, attentive. Picks up the cards when Hannibal does. Mirrors his shrug and does not meet his eyes, coming near to them, but never quite, as though watching something just over his shoulder instead.

"That is all I've been told," Hannibal adds at last, "regarding the nature of our meeting. I thought it would be rude to dig further before making your acquaintance properly." Another of those strange thin smiles, that seems so genuine and warm and yet never reaches earnestness.

"I may reconsider once we part ways."

A wan smile appears in return, small but charming. Hannibal wonders as to Will's age, easily shifted from much younger now, to older moments before as he watched listless out the window.

"While there's very little information you'd find on me, generally speaking, I would still caution against it. Sets a particular tone for our acquaintanceship," Will suggests. "I'm afraid you may not care for my company once you've studied me."

His brows draw in, young again, and he plays another card.

"It's precisely the opening of doors that's required," he continues, lips twisting into a thoughtful look as he studies his cards. "You needn't hold my hand. I would prefer if you did not. But considering the nature of the information we're after, it's admittedly not an unwelcome consideration to know that one is not alone in a den of vipers." He pauses, pensive. "Although it could simply mean two poisoned, rather than only one."

Something that passes for humor, perhaps.

A look over the rims of round glasses, and then silence as they play.

The first game shows Will the victor, and Hannibal shuffles and sets the deck before Will to have him deal, should he want another.

"Trust is a currency that men like you and I rarely spend," Hannibal says softly, but implies nothing further regarding their mutual work within the opium ring. This particular one, at least. The police did enough to cover the visible symptoms of the rot beneath the city, followed up on murders, attempted to clear the streets, yet were easy enough to buy. Few needed to infiltrate when they were on the payroll. Few needed to investigate when that money kept them comfortable.

There was a reason there's no knowledge of secret police in London.

Secret is, after all, the operative word.

"Yet I have enough trust for our mutual acquaintance to meet you, and I shall let that linger between us as I help you in." He takes his cards as they're dealt, regards the younger man before him again, with his drawn brows and damp hair, heavy bags under his eyes that should not weigh down someone his age.

"I can take you in next week," Hannibal says at last, sitting back and stretching his legs out straight beneath the table, angled in such a way as to not brush Will's were he to do the same. "Bad weather draws more games, larger crowds, easier access and better cover."

Another brief look and a press of lips together before Hannibal finally asks, "Have you ever taken it?"

"No," Will responds, a glance upward at this, no charm in his response now, no rueful jest. Honest. Curious. "I briefly undertook a regimen of laudanum - which I understand to be of similar effect - for an injury I received, but I found that the effect on my sleeping habits was

far more trying than any medical benefit was worth. As I mentioned, I rarely partake - I find that my thoughts are peculiar enough without it."

Trust is a funny thing. More dangerous to those in their field than almost any other, and yet in this work, a necessity - absolute and immediate - from the start of any relationship.

The interplay isn't unfamiliar - a sudden rash of honesty, although never particularly personal, in hopes that the other can be trusted to share information back with them. An exchange, forced but genuine.

Will finds that he is only rarely assigned to a partner for jobs like this - adaptable enough to play a range of roles, talented enough in his understand of others to yield little to them beyond themselves, reflected, or what they wish to see. Initially he had declined, no interest in working this district any more. No interest in being responsible or open enough to support a partner. No interest especially in trying to explain to someone else, again, how he understands, how he sees, in any way that wouldn't earn him a trip to a priest or a spiritualist.

"Have you taken it?"

A swallow, brief, is answer enough, though Hannibal allows himself to voice an explanation.

"Trust barter for truth," he says, sets down another card, wins the round and settles the pile aside to start another. "Trust is established by walking through fire and hoping you come out unscathed."

He taps the edge of his cards against the table softly, not a nervous gesture but a measuring one.

"If you know the effects and remember them, perhaps your trial will not be as physical, for proof," he smiles. "You will, after all, have me with you."

It's not as though Will didn't expect this. It's hardly sensible to assume one wouldn't be expected to engage in iniquity when - very literally - entering a den of it. A show of one's own hand to assure that no extra cards are held. A sowing of seeds to be reaped at a later point.

It doesn't change the slight twist of his mouth, the shadow in his eyes as Will pushes his hair back from his face.

"I ought to have been practicing," he mutters, folding his hand of cards together to regard the bespectacled man across from him, considering Hannibal. Considering their cover.

"It won't make sense to act as though my inexperience is anything but, however my interest should be presented perhaps as less in consumption - though I will have it, as offered by way of contract - than in investment in the operation itself. A silent partner."

Will draws his lower lip between his teeth. Keeps it there in thought until he speaks again, eyes finally coming to rest on the dark, curious ones across from him.

"The stories in the dreadfuls aren't worth the paper they're printed on, but will it be safe?" he asks, and hesitates, funneling fear into caution, the taste of it all acrid as burnt paper on his tongue. "It concerns me, what will happen once I've had it. How exposed I'll be to - to attack, or robbery. Where my thoughts will wander. If they'll return to me."

Will rests the back of his hand across his mouth and sighs a humorless laugh from behind it.

"It hardly matters, does it? Forget that I asked."

Trust is a funny thing.

"It certainly matters to them, if you show fear," Hannibal responds softly, though there is no cruelty in his tone, no goading or unnecessary meanness.

"You will not be exposed, with me." And the tone there is genuine reassurance, a calm confidence that speaks of experience that Will can't argue against. "To either attack or robbery. Your thoughts, I'm afraid, I will not be able to protect."

A brief shuffle of the cards in his hand and Hannibal sets them face down and away, leaning both elbows on the table, hands clasped gently just under his chin.

"Unless, that is, you school me in doing so. What is it you fear losing, that you believe will not return to you?"

Will's not able to restrain the look of wariness that crosses his features when the question is asked, drawing his lower lip between his teeth and releasing it just as quickly. In some way, he's grateful that their mutual acquaintance didn't brief Hannibal in this, didn't try to speak for Will or explain how he works, but it doesn't ease the tension from his shoulders when his elbows brace against the table and his fingers fold in front of his mouth.

"Sanity," Will answers after considerable thought. "I've yet to discover a way to describe it. Neither have the doctors, I should tell you, in the interest of trust shared." Evident frustration, the source of his exhaustion, visible for just a moment before he tucks it away, eases his expression back to one of simply being very tired indeed.

Dreadful weather.

"A mania, of sorts, but the term seems unbecoming. The opposite, in fact, of how it feels. You've done this long enough, I assume, to judge other people. To see a particular shift in the body, to hear words unspoken that in them convey deeper truths. You can see through this lens when you need it, you are able to remove it when no longer needed, when you return to your boarding house at the end of the day."

He waits for a confirmation, and finding it in observant silence, shrugs with a faint grimace. "Imagine that you were unable to ever remove it. That every unspoken truth of every situation in which you find yourself is always so obvious. I fear," he says, clearly, but swallowing as he does, "the day that the lens becomes a part of me, irretrievably. That I become deaf, dumb. Pulled beneath to drown in the sea of those around me. It's why I initially declined the job. Merely being in this city is overpowering for the amount of people

and the shadows that they keep. And I don't know how this particular substance will heighten that."

Hannibal listens, watches as Will mirrors his body language, his slow breathing once he's said what he must. Perhaps something he is unable to control, perhaps something from a very young age.

It is an exquisite skill to possess, in their line of work, incredibly useful, impossible to corrupt. Hannibal wonders if ever Will sees the advantage of it, or simply suffers its burden. For long moments they do not speak, Will turns his eyes away from Hannibal's but not his body, he does not curl in on himself or hide.

"Why did you change your mind about the job?" he asks at length.

The rain hasn't stopped or slowed, seeming somehow denser still through the warped curves of the windowpane. Will lets his eyes rest on it, rather than the man watching him so intently across the table, and imagines again that the waters are rising.

"The compensation is substantial, enough that I'll have little need for this again for at least the remainder of the year."

It's a half-truth, and Hannibal's brow lifts. Will doesn't need to see it to sense it, and allows another small, rueful smile.

"Curiosity, perhaps. Boredom. I enjoy the idea of the work, if not the act itself. Removing some of the troubles of the world," he answers, and adds wryly, "I believe the concept, theologically, is referred to as being a sin-eater."

A shrug now, a closure of thoughts shared far too quickly, far too openly, far beyond what he would say in any other time, to anyone else but this stranger, here, eyes hidden behind the reflection of fire in his glasses, with whom he is now expected to trust his life.

Whose life has in turn been entrusted to him.

"And for as much as it divests me of myself, I'm very good at what I do."

Will's fingers find the cards again and flick absently through their corners, a sound that seems suddenly loud between their softened voices and the fall of rain.

"Why did you accept?"

"Curiosity, perhaps." A smile, closer still to genuine. "Boredom."

The repeat is not meant to tease, but is simply the answer Hannibal wishes to give him. He regards Will's fingers on the cards and does not yet unfold his hands to take his own.

"There is a belief that once an evil man is divested of his power, another will always rise in his place. I do not seek to eradicate the nest, simply adjust the function of its hierarchy. Alone, one man can grow corrupted. I do not wish to replace the evil with a counterpart of myself. I did not accept, Will, I requested."

He takes up his cards, a brief glance before setting down the first to open another game, then his eyes return to Will's.

Will arches a brow, studying Hannibal for a moment more before picking up his cards. A mirror or intentional, it hardly matters or makes a difference now, as he settles back in his chair with a thoughtful hum.

"But you've been doing this for some time," Will observes. "Long enough that you're able to bring in someone new. An investor, an outsider with financial stakes, and be trusted that it's for the good of all involved." He wets his lips, brows furrowing as he arranges his cards and plays the next. A hesitation, eyes reflecting firelight as they lift. "Do you feel yourself becoming corrupted?"

"I feel myself growing tired," Hannibal corrects. "Something I'm aware you are far too familiar with. Exhaustion leads to mistakes, and I have been doing this long enough to grow to value my skin."

Another card set, a furrow of brows from the other man when he cannot match it. The hand is folded, shuffled aside, and Hannibal begins again.

"Perhaps you will see the corruption within me before I feel it. And I can trust you to suck the poison from the wound. Perhaps you have a death wish."

Hannibal grins, and it reaches his eyes.

"Perhaps I need you for that, then," he offers, "to save me from myself."

Will has missed this, if he's honest, and there's certainly no better time to be honest with himself than now. The camaraderie of another, a stranger yes but much more besides, who understands the sleeplessness, the struggle, the isolation of it all. An experience impossible to share - on assurance of prison, death, or both - with anyone outside their very particular field.

He can't ask where Hannibal's from. His surname. Where he stays. What he does when he's not being swallowed by the grime and grit of it all. Better not to know in case something goes awry, and in truth, it hardly matters anyway.

"You'll protect me from the cobras we can see," Will responds, a slight smile lingering, caught in the corner of his mouth, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "I will protect you from the ones we cannot."

The cards play between them, so quick as to be almost reflexive, little effort but for the agility of their minds.

"A moral compass, slightly tarnished, in trade for a lantern, somewhat dimmed," he muses softly. "Hopefully little need for saving at all. I join you, we gather what's needed, and perhaps we both can sleep again when it's done." Another card, another glance above them. "What will you do, the first day that you're no longer who you have to be now?"

Hannibal hums, considering, folds away another played hand - Will's victory - before waiting for the younger man to start another. He has been so long in this that it's hard to explain to anyone out of it that he has no memory or concept beyond this. He can't remember the last time this had not been his work, his life.

Living, breathing, eating stress and exhaustion and danger.

"Perhaps I will go fishing," Hannibal responds, smiling softly at his cards before he selects another, changes his mind and passes the turn instead. "I have not been for a long time. And there is a peace to it."

It's just a gentle pull, careful, to free the thought from Hannibal. Will knows he can't tug any harder at the seams holding him together, knows all too well the pain that laid each stitch that now makes him who he is when he leaves here and returns to the darkness. It must be maintained for it to be believable, and there is no good in lingering too long on a life outside of that.

But Will accepts the answer, and his smile widens, curving crooked as he tucks a curl of hair - now dry - behind his ear and plays another card.

"The same answer as my own," he replies, pleased, "although hopefully far from here. If any fish still struggle to inhabit the Thames, one can only imagine on what they've been subsisting. The discards of coal factories and the bones of the poor, perhaps."

"Filth of the earth feeding life," Hannibal agrees, eyes up a moment, "as is always the way. Humans are incredibly adaptable to survive - the instinct to live trumps all, including the drive for shelter, and food and sex." The word slides richly through his accent and Hannibal shrugs.

"There is a saying that one's shit always smells sweetest, yet I would not say no to the warm beaches of the Mediterranean." A laugh. "Maybe someday."

The last card is laid, Hannibal's, and he tilts his head, crossing his arms against the table. A victory apiece, today.

"We should save another for when we have something to bet," he says, a gentle suggestion that they part ways, both exhausted, yet somehow warmed by the company newly made. The warmth, he hopes will linger.

Will stiffens a little, draws up taller in his chair and tones his expression to one of polite neutrality. Altogether better than expected, despite the tug of information given to someone not yet known, and aware entirely that the end of this meeting brings them one step closer to the next.

Perhaps it will only be for games of whist, but Will knows he's lying to himself and it loses all its pleasure.

He returns the cards to Hannibal, grasping his hand as he does, a firm shake held.

"Let's hope that your skill in playing cards foreshadows your skill in playing people," Will intones, eyes lingering on Hannibal a moment more before he withdraws his hands to smooth them down the front of his waistcoat.

"We will meet here, then, a week from tonight. You will bring your lantern, and I, my compass," murmurs Will as he slides into his frock coat again, buttoning it against the cold. He sends a narrow look towards the door, and sighs.

"Dreadful weather."

Hannibal watches him, feels the tug of a smile against his lips as the younger man leaves, with Hannibal's nod as his confirmation, his guarantee.

Trust is a funny thing.

And the weather truly is dreadful.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

He does not let himself think of what happens if the poppy burns too thick for him. Does not let himself think of what happens if Hannibal cannot reach him or worse, chooses not to. Will would be lucky to twist into the depths of his mind were that the case, far more likely to meet an untidy end robbed and left to bleed out in Old Nichol.

"I will try not to wander far," Will adds after a moment more, softly, "and I will listen for your voice."

Chapter Notes

warning for this chapter: copious drug use

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next week brings no better weather and more sleepless nights.

Once trust is offered, tentatively taken, there is a period of time where trust is not felt. Where every possibility and every flaw and every worry slips into the blood and infects the mind. Until sleep is a memory and comfort a wish.

Hannibal wonders if Will had found comfort in his earnestness by looking, if he had read something from him that Hannibal had not said, perhaps not even explicitly implied.

It hardly matters now.

The man would join him, meet him here, or whatever was left of the honest police force in this city would.

He smokes without removing the cigarette from his lips, pocket watch on the table, ticking almost too loudly for the stifling space, and deals himself another hand of Patience.

"How early you must have arrived to enforce the truth of your claims," comes the familiar voice as Will shoulders into the room, and lets the door close behind him. His lips purse into a bare smile as he shakes the rain from his coat, or tries to, and tousles fingers through his damp curls, black low topper in hand.

There's a familiarity there, a forced fondness born of circumstance and expectation, as Will watches smoke twist from Hannibal's lips, unsure if he sees a smile curl across the older

man's mouth, or has simply wished there to be to ease his own nerves.

Will sighs and unpockets his watch. Nearly an hour before they are expected, and the location not nearly far enough away. "Time enough then for any last minute business." He pauses, quirks a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Or a hand, instead. You are my guide tonight, come what may."

He does not remove his coat, but does tug free his gloves to warm his hands by the fire for a moment. Finer dress than before, a grey overcoat worn over a sleek waistcoat, shiny satin, and his shoes recently shined. But for all that, the look is not one of ostentation - rather a comfortable wealth, worn beautifully. All the trappings of money and none of the ease in his eyes, more drawn overall than before. An attempted affectation towards the wan demeanor of the upper class, though more likely a simple lack of sleep that happens to serve that purpose.

Hannibal gathers the cards and shuffles them, eyes hooded beneath the same round glasses, lips parted at the corner of his mouth to breathe out the smoke he sucks in through the thin filter. He takes in Will's appearance, the way he holds himself, has to give the young man credit for adding the costume to go with his cover.

Someone of that class would not be afraid to show their status, though they would not flaunt it.

"I can deal another hand," he agrees, tapping his fingers gently against the cards' well-used edges. "Whoever wins it will be treated to a drink upon arrival."

A silly bet, but something to keep their minds at ease. And either could be the victor without repercussions on their roles: Will's victory assured his possession of money, his confidence in spending it. Hannibal's merely cemented their closeness, two friends sharing a drink together in a place both wish to belong.

He spreads his hands in gentle question and does smile then, reaching up to take the cigarette from between his lips to ash it to the floor.

Will's hands span across the table as he assumes his seat, tossing his hair back from his face with quiet amusement.

"A man of habit," he intones, tongue in cheek, a stab at humor to ease the ticking of timepieces that seem far louder than their casings should allow.

The cards, the drink, the weed - now back between his lips - and all manner of iniquities into which Will is a hand of whist away from delving. He watches Hannibal, far more than the cards that play readily enough without diverting much of his attention, taking in the placid movements.

"Should I expect to meet him tonight? The proprietor."

Hannibal shrugs, directs his eyes up.

"He's rarely not around," he comments, pulling the cigarette free from his lips to extinguish the end pressed between two fingers, then he sets it alongside his watch and continues the game.

"He will approach you, dressed as you are. Offer things you should not refuse if you would like his repeat company." A brief flash of tongue against lips and Hannibal pushes away the played set, starting another. "And an invitation to return."

His eyes don't leave Will now, playing through his peripheral.

"It is nothing you have not seen," he assures him softly, after a moment, voice not pitying, not patronizing, but just that little bit gentler. "Nothing you have not tasted. And where your mind may wander, I will bring it back."

Will's attention lingers and softens beneath the certainty in Hannibal's voice and the stalwart look in his eyes. There is no fear or doubt found in the lines of his features, and no reassurance that does not stem from a place of absolute conviction. Will sighs, and returns his eyes to his cards.

Trusting enough that Will's capability exceeds his lack of experience in this. Trusting enough that Hannibal's risked cover to allow in another will not be in vain.

Trusting that there are no possibilities but these.

"Tonight is simple," Will tells himself. "Arrive. Drink, smoke, and talk about the weather and my father's investments in light of recent redistricting until I am introduced. And then, the real game begins."

A glance towards Hannibal, towards the lenses illuminated by flickering gas lamps on the wall. "Accept what is offered, and then delve, into the maw of the dragon, and wait for you pull me free again," Will continues, clucking his tongue in thought. "Each time further than the last, until we have the scope of how deep the serpent's belly lays."

Another breath drawn, held, the taste of burning paper sharp against his tongue.

He does not let himself think of what happens if the poppy burns too thick for him. Does not let himself think of what happens if Hannibal cannot reach him or worse, chooses not to. Will would be lucky to twist into the depths of his mind were that the case, far more likely to meet an untidy end robbed and left to bleed out in Old Nichol.

"I will try not to wander far," Will adds after a moment more, softly, "and I will listen for your voice."

Hannibal nods, having taken his answers to unspoken questions from Will's expressions, flitting quick and hard to pin across the man's young face.

Another round is played, another set of cards shifted aside and they play on in silence. Around them, the sound of rain swells, beneath the white noise, the distinct sound of heavier drops, closer, taking sharp dives into otherwise undisturbed puddles.

The game ends. Hannibal regards Will over the rims of his glasses, taps the bottom edge of his remaining cards against the table.

"Purchase the bottle," he advises. "We will share it between us until more come asking. Let them. Socialize. Present. Spend your money as though you have been born into it. Do not drink more than three glasses yourself, you will need a clear head."

Hannibal leans to take up all of the cards, to shuffle them, and set them in the center of the table as they had been when he'd arrived, alone, early. His fingers linger, his eyes the same.

"We have both agreed and chosen this, Will," he reminds him, "but this is still a world I am taking you into, it is not yet yours. You will see me there as I am there, not as I am with you."

He looks up then.

"Trust that I *am* with you."

He waits for the nod, for the gentle furrowing of brows that suggests confusion and genuine worry within the young man, and nods in return.

"I will not leave you in that den to die."

Hannibal stands and takes up his coat, the same one he had worn last week, heavy and patchy where rain had fallen upon it before his arrival. He shoulders it, adjusts the buttons and takes up his hat.

"We are ten blocks east," he says, "and we will not take the main road."

And so they go, back into the rain, a drizzle now but cold enough, damp enough still to settle into the bones. Hannibal exits the rear, Will the fore, and with the angular block circumvented they meet again, and Will allows a slight smile in greeting. He's surprised at how earnest it is, how pleased he is to see him even then and know that he does not begin this alone.

He's relieved to find it so.

"If the instinct to live truly trumps all others," Will muses as they near, "one wonders what parts were misplaced when we were made."

And with that, subtle movements in turn, each adapting in strides down the waterlogged side street that takes them away from the amber glow of gaslamps reflective off paved roads. Hannibal's shoulders curve furtive beneath his coat, an unwelcoming posture, though not drawn in enough that his imposing size would go unnoticed. Will, the opposite, back straightening and hands smoothing any wrinkles real or otherwise from his coat - to draw attention to it, and to draw attention to the drawing of attention.

There are others here. It would be foolish to assume otherwise. They need not see them to know that vagabonds hang near the crossroads that separate easier lives from those of squalor, waiting to avail themselves of those who misstep the unmarked boundaries. Tolls to be paid, tributes to the barons of the block, at every turn.

Without a doubt, Will would be similarly availed of his belongings or his being, were he alone in these borderlands dressed as he is, and he spares another long look to the man at his side, cigarette cradled in hand to shield it from the rain, and a spanning alertness in focusing on nothing in particular, but seeing everything.

They cross into a narrow pathway that runs twisting between tenements so high and narrow that there is no sky to be seen between them. Will hums, a quiet dismay, as he searches for it anyway, a moment allowed in longing for the stars he know must be there still, beyond the buildings and the soot.

A soft sound brings Will to a stop, and Hannibal glances quickly towards him.

“We should not linger here,” he advises softly, but Will has crouched already, hand offered out to a dog taking shelter from the rain beneath a precarious overhang. Hannibal hardly watches, looking each direction to the sides of them, aware behind and fore, and puffs his cigarette in a flicker of displeasure as Will’s scratches behind the dog’s ear.

“We have several at father’s home - charming animals,” Will responds, voice carrying just a little, a blithe tone of pleasure that Hannibal suspects is as much genuine as it is an act, readily assuming the role of an eager upperclass tourist dallying in the slums for an evening of debauchery. Truth and lie mixed indistinguishable, but Will smiles a little, in earnest pleasure, when the dog shuffles closer to him. “I wish I’d saved a bit of dinner to share,” murmurs Will towards the animal, and only then, with a patient hand, does Hannibal touch his shoulder to draw him upward again.

“Come. There are enough strays in this city for you to waste your meals upon later,” Hannibal intones, gentle amusement, and grateful that the rain has driven away whatever alleged owner might have been waiting nearby to charge for the privilege of petting the wretched creature. Hannibal quirks a smile, though, just in his eyes, and adds, “And it would hardly suit you to catch the mange.”

Will blinks up at him, back at the shaggy damp dog who looks towards him eagerly, and stands, lower lip drawn between his teeth as he turns again to follow. They emerge from the alleyway onto a street laid thick with the waste of horses and humans in its gutters, voices ringing from the buildings around them - songs and shouting, laughter and leering calls from a girl who observes them from a window overhead. Will stretches a little, shuts himself to the sounds that draw his attention from every direction, and the look of distance in his eyes is hardly affectation as they proceed.

Focused only on Hannibal now, close beside him, the Virgil to his Dante, and on the rain against the brim of his hat, and on the soil beneath his shoes, quickly muddied from their former polish.

In silence, the distance seems longer; the street overwhelming with its smells and sounds and the cold penetrating it all, sliding beneath warm layers of clothing to chill the very bones.

After a while, Will concentrates only on the quick ticking of the pocket watch he holds in his hand, feeling the little mechanism through the thick glove he wears. He hones in on it, lets his

mind settle against that desperate little ticking until Hannibal presses a palm to his chest, bare fingers, splayed to hold him still, to ground him.

"To your left," he murmurs, once he sees Will return, once those eyes focus on him again and he knows Will can feel the sounds and sensations flood him once more.

Then he moves further along the street, two more houses, Will notices, and speaks to a man at the door. The language he uses is unfamiliar to Will, not the sharp staccato of Chinese, nor the lazy drawl of the lower classes. It is a hissing language, melodic and unusual, and the man smiles before flicking his eyes to Will. There are perhaps two teeth within his mouth not rotten when he grins, and Will swallows before returning the expression, his own teeth unrevealed by it.

Hannibal says a few words more and the man nods, opens the door to let them both through.

Within, the air is thick with smoke, and dizzying. The room is not large, though the space looks almost tavern-like. Mats and cushions line the floor with enough passage between to walk deeper in. Further, couches with rich embroidery, expensive chairs in the French style, low tables bearing pipes and glasses and people in the throes of the drug already within them.

There is a staircase up, to a level they are not permitted to enter, and a small bar just to the side.

They have come early, the room is yet to fill.

A far nicer establishment than the serials ever describe, Will considers, but isn't that just the way of them? He settles a little, the barest shift of shoulders to appear as slightly more comfortable than before. Anticipating the worst - bodies spread and splayed in every direction, coughing and hysteria, a sea of hopelessness - and finding instead a rather richly appointed bar with the unique affectation of couches, those upon them seemingly comfortable, sleepy in their stupors.

Will wonders absently which one will be his, licking his lower lip between his teeth, and bringing to life a smile, sudden and seemingly effortless.

"I believe I owe you a drink," he murmurs, no overemphasis, simply bringing to light the sentiment already at hand. "Brandy seems appropriate - warm us from the chill. Dreadful," he sighs, removing his hat as he enters, taking in the space in wide glances, to follow Hannibal's lead to the bar.

Not out of place, but unusual, and Will feels it acutely in the looks he's given. He draws a deep breath, the rich, heady aroma of poppy smoke twining thickly towards the ceiling, not unpleasant.

The barman has a face like an old tree, dark skin and lines where the skin bends and turns as his expressions change. His eyes, strangely, are the lightest brown, entirely at odds with the rest of him, and always shifting. He accepts Will's money with a snort of amusement, and passes over the bottle as he'd requested.

Two glasses are set down on front of them with a snap.

Hannibal watches Will pour for them, letting his eyes leave him a moment to regard one of the pipes set on the low table, the runner that once lay pristine now wrinkled in someone's fumbled desire to get their hit. His lips draw back on a sigh, as though in a snarl, but the look is hungry, not angry.

He takes the drink in one long shot and sets the glass to the table again with a low laugh.

"You owe me more than a drink."

"As you keep reminding me."

Hannibal grins, the expression unlike the one he had flashed at Will before, in the comfort of the quiet back room of a bar. This is a predatory thing, dangerous, and he himself the hunter here, in his territory.

"As I will keep doing until it's paid."

The conversation carries but isn't loud, the space feels smaller and stifled with the smoke hovering near the ceiling and obscuring the faces of those that recline and watch them.

"How variable your debts once you realize that the payment is indefinite," Will sighs, feigning burden, as he shrugs free of his coat. It's taken from him but a boy half his age if a day, his hat along with it, and Hannibal's in turn, to be spirited away, and Will watches as Hannibal snares the boy by the wrist and murmurs something at him in that same strange language.

A blink, amused, and Will takes the bottle from the barkeep to pour another for Hannibal, sipping his own comfortably. A grimace, a quiet hiss, pleased as the liquor burns sweet and raw across his tongue.

"Surely it wasn't that many games," he adds, a note of mild distress. "Was it?"

"More often than not. I did warn you that you would not often finish first."

Turning a slight smile towards Hannibal, mingling earnestness with the mimicry, the movements of someone above his station - perhaps someone in particular in mind, perhaps not, but not the poorly-postured young man of the back room of their meetinghouse, transformed instead with a particular lift of his chin, the cast of his eyes curious into the space around them.

Guileless and young and moneyed, with a streak of debauchery, and for a place such as this, perfect.

He resists the urge to ask about the upstairs, or rather plays at resistance while sparing it a curious look, and straightens, running a hand down the front of his waistcoat and sharing a conspiratorial smile with Hannibal, far too earnest to actually be such.

"Dickens would have had us think that there were wastrels and corpses pouring out in the streets."

"There are plenty," this voice is accented, too, but different from how Hannibal's is, "if you know where to look, boy."

One of the patrons that had been watching them, the more conscious of them, perhaps.

"Or is it that you look but do not see?"

"Folly of money," Hannibal comments, tilting his head, meeting Will's eyes and narrowing his own just barely in place of a nod. Accept this. Play with it.

"The folly of youth," is the argument, and the man laughs. Where he is from is impossible to tell, his skin is not dark nor very pale, his words coherent though not from London in origin. He leans beside Hannibal as though they're close acquaintances, no distance between them in companionable amusement.

Hannibal sets his glass down, the other picks it up as though through some beautiful unspoken choreography, and with a huff of a laugh, Will pours the next drink for him.

"Are you smart as you are pretty I wonder?" the man grins, shoots back his drink and shakes his head. "What are you doing in a place like this then? With the likes of him?"

"A question I ask myself all too frequently," Will laughs, seemingly mindless as to the little terms of dismissal, of putting the finely-dressed young man in his place.

Not unwelcome, but neither embraced, he motions graciously to the bottle, allowing them to share at will, and finishing his own glass more quickly now, as though eager to keep up. It's noted, with pleasure, by their new guest who watches, shrewd.

"As for his company, I can hardly justify it, for myself or any others, beyond his formidable skill with cards," he answers, a good-natured ribbing. "As for this place," shrugs Will, "let us call it a desire to see, rather than to simply look."

He lifts his newly full glass with an amicable smile, and does not down it fully, hand pressed to his lips and cheeks flushed.

"Boredom," he adds, a murmur from behind his hand, eyes bright. "The luxury born of both follies you've described."

A raising of a brow, an amused hum from the unnamed patron, and the man takes up Will's generosity to fill and down his glass again.

"A dangerous place to be bored, lad."

"He has the unfortunate habit of never listening," Hannibal agrees, taking another glass from the barman, filling it, and stepping away from the bar, separating them all from that tether by doing so. "To reason, logic or the emptiness of his pocket."

Another laugh, a brief lingering to fill the glass a third time, and the man follows. Will is left with the choice to join them or find his way on his own.

Hannibal settles on an unoccupied couch and takes up a pipe, discarded by another. He does not make room for Will, he merely waits for the young man to sit on his own, perched, for the moment, on the arm instead of sitting comfortably.

"Something to fuel your interest," he murmurs, passing the long thing to Will, watching the way his jaw works just barely, the way he transmits that with a sigh of surprise and nervous delight for the eyes of the patron still watching them, for anyone else who could be.

Above them a floorboard creaks but Hannibal just blinks at Will, waiting.

Will doesn't glance towards the precarious sound overhead, but takes the pipe with interest instead, entirely too pleased as he turns it over in his hands, studying the ivory of the pipe itself, the black resin inside the bowl.

"The smell of it is extraordinary," he comments, settling into the couch across the small table from Hannibal with a sweep of his coattails. "Rather an improvement from those just outside."

Amusement curves his lips and he regards Hannibal curiously. "You will have to instruct me, I'm afraid, hopefully a kinder lesson than those you have taught me in cards."

Hannibal returns the brief smile, a narrowing in his eyes.

"Lay," he instructs softly, casting a look to those few around them who have already partaken, in comfortable sprawls. Will blinks, a devious sort of innocence about him as he does so, pulling his legs up beside him and smoothing out his clothes as best he can. He lets his hand rest over the pocket watch, a steady mechanism to time his heart against, and then grasps the pipe again with both hands.

"Heat it over the flame, and as you do, breathe," Hannibal continues, their eyes meeting across the little lamp glowing brightly. Another smile, faint. "Do not forget to breathe."

He takes a deep and bracing breath and releases it, a nervous energy, excitement as he leans, pipe placed between his lips. The flame curls softly beneath the saddle, warming the resin to a trickle of grey but no more than that as the rest of the dense vapor is drawn through the length of pipe.

Far sweeter than the brandy still hot on his lips, smoke furls across his tongue and Will breathes deeper still to inhale it, lets it press against his lungs until he has to release it, sighing, and plumes of smoke pour softly from between his parted lips.

The couches make a great deal more sense suddenly, and Will laughs, a light and winsome sound as his head swims.

"Hell," he mutters, pleased, pressing a hand to his eyes and blinking wide, a scarlet blush across his nose now, onto his cheeks. "I shouldn't have waited nearly so long for this."

Lighter in body, lighter in mind, already the last week's anxious preparations seem extraordinarily unnecessary when everything already is going so well. And why wouldn't it, really? His caution blurs to the outskirts of his thoughts, comfortable already as he leans to partake again, eyes closing as he lets the smoke fill him once more.

The man keeping their company laughs, a rough sound, and returns to where he had settled before the call of free liquor moved him upright.

“No longer bored, huh kid?”

A soft laugh and Will shakes his head. Hannibal watches.

Regards the languid way the younger man sprawls where he rests, the way his eyes are barely open and darker, the way all the tension has left him. He keeps an eye, also, on those around him. Some watching Will with interest, others with lust, others still with too clear an eye to warrant them being here, after far more than Will's wallet, his watch and expensive clothes.

Blood has a particular tang alongside the sweetness of opium.

He reaches, shifts the lamp closer to Will before gesturing to the boy who had taken their coats to bring him another pipe.

His own inhale brings the familiar weight to his limbs, the familiar and welcome warmth to them. It's as though the world has color again, as though every sound that was dull has sharpened. Hannibal reclines with his arms spread wide over the back of the couch, head dropped back, throat working as he swallows, before he moves just enough to fill his lungs again.

This is comfort, this is a company he cannot imagine ever leaving.

He feels the smoke mingle with the air still clean in his chest until that, too, vanishes, and he is left filled and fulfilled.

And where your mind may wander, I will bring it back.

Will watches Hannibal, through the pale swathes of smoke, watches the spread of his arms and his body turned nearly liquid into the pale red cushions, no tension there, no pain or aches. The contentment settles into Hannibal as though it were his soul returning. His fingers flex, coiling tight and releasing and Will wonders how often, truly, Hannibal makes habit of this, and where the line blurs between one's cover and the reality of their existence.

He wonders it with no more concern than he wonders if the rain will ever cease.

It will, surely it will, as Hannibal will bring Will back to himself again.

He swallows, sitting up enough to bring his pipe across the flame and drink down another belt of grey, before he sets the pipe aside and lets it billow from his lips. Rolling onto his side with little mind now for his clothing - little mind for much of anything, beyond the passive observance of movement around them, and the more acute observance of Hannibal - Will

tucks an arm beneath his head, as settled as if he were at home, surrounded by fields instead of filth, with skies of stars rather than soot.

"You do this often," Will notes softly, eyes inky with pupil and no light to be found in their blackened depths.

A smile, slow, deliberate, and Hannibal sighs, the exhale bringing his head down between his shoulders before he completes the movement and reaches for the pipe again.

"As you will start to," he responds, and his voice has grown rougher, lower, a purr, almost, as one word floats into another and Will sees them instead of hearing - another plume of grey. And so much more than grey, blues and greens and softer colors within before the coils move to join their predecessors near the ceiling and dissipate entirely.

"You will say your rosary to this soon enough," Hannibal assures him, his smile hungry for just a blink before it melds to laxity once more. He shifts to recline back as Will is, one arm up to cover his eyes before slipping from them, too, to bend behind and over the arm of the couch he rests on.

For a moment more they're silent, as Will takes the words in, lets them penetrate the clouding of his mind and settle, for later, perhaps, or to be exhaled and forgotten once the smoke leaves him.

"Hannibal."

American, this man, certainly, a drawl too articulate to be the product of the drug, too practiced to be put on. Will can't quite manage to turn his head but it's clear Hannibal does, when the man continues.

"Corrupting the youth, how delightful."

Will observes, inexplicably pleased, the curve of Hannibal's body as he arches towards the voice, watching its source upside down for a moment.

"Simple enough when the youth seek corruption," Will responds, agile of mind if not of body, fearless as he meets Hannibal's eyes.

"Is that so? What a time to be alive." The voice, loud, ringing clear and much nearer now. Will draws his lower lip between his teeth, mouth still curved into a saintly little smile as Hannibal watches more closely than before. It's unclear why, really, when they've done so well already - to drink and to smoke, to see this place and the lay of the cushion-crowded land - and Will's smile simply brightens at him.

Hands brace against Will's shoulders, press there and turn him onto his back, and Will goes with it, unstartled by the touch or the man looming curiously over him.

"Used to be you had to work for these things. Isn't that right, Hannibal?"

A hum, agreement, and a shift of fabric to suggest that whatever strength Hannibal had left within him he'd summoned to sit up in the presence of the man they had come here to meet.

Will just smiles wider, earning a smile in return. He wonders if it appears manic because of the smoke coiling around and behind him.

“Used to put in the hours for the reward. But money can buy so much these days. And youth is the very best at spending it.”

A press of a hot palm against Will’s cheek and a motion as though to turn his head that is never completed.

“He is in debt,” Hannibal adds gently, words heavier with his accent now that he no longer consciously holds it back. “He works very hard to keep himself there, if his losses at poker are much to judge by.”

“A gambler.” The man seems almost delightfully shocked. “My, my, what haven’t we done, Mister...?”

"Will," he responds readily, a curling enthusiasm in the tone of his voice, a play at youth so convincing that it hardly seems a play at all. He tilts his head into the hand, just a little, rather than drawing from it, a motion unseen but certainly felt.

"Will." A thumb traces the line of his jaw, almost affectionate.

"And I'm quite certain it's," Will's words break on a soft laugh, running a hand down over his eyes, "it's a very long list."

The stranger clucks his tongue, tutting softly and leaning nearer. "What do you say we start at the top then, and work our way down?"

Will starts to turn over, to tilt his head, but is held as he is, the hand against his cheek firming to keep him in place.

"I'm afraid I may have already begun at the bottom," Will blinks, amused, and Hannibal's brow lifts at this. The man leans close enough now that Will can feel his breath against him, and closes his eyes with a shiver.

"If you think that, it just means you've got further to go." There is a nudge, metal, cold beneath Will's nose, and a medicinal smell, chalky. He opens his eyes again, slowly, and looks towards Hannibal past the hand that holds a little mound of powder against his nose. The voice tugs him back. "Why, Sherlock Holmes himself uses it. Keeps him on his toes. Imagine what it would do for a smart kid like you."

Will finds Hannibal's eyes and can't read them, inscrutable and dark, and that, enough information in itself. He swallows hard and breathes, a quick intake of air that carries with it the cocaine, far more than any reasonable doctor would prescribe, and Will flinches a little, coughing as it dries against the back of his throat.

"Hell," Will breathes, rough-voiced, rasping, and the man laughs, a cacophony of delight.

"Not yet, but you're on your way."

Another laugh, a gentle slap against the cheek Will had turned and the man pulls away, walks back around to speak to Hannibal on the other couch.

Will's eyes roll back and the white powder slips to his blood.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, and because we are obsessive researchers, what our darling detective has just been given is essentially a 19th-century [speedball](#)!

And we loved seeing everyone's guesses as to who's writing who, and while we increasingly share everyone around, in this series, Will belongs to Blood, and Hannibal to Whiskey. Mason is a blessing and a burden on us both.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Will we go back soon?" Will asks, and a flicker of thought follows it, pulled from the vapors. "He means me harm, doesn't he?"

Hannibal hesitates.

"Yes," he says at last.

Hannibal watches, eyes forced clear through the cloying, comforting smog of his mind, as Will jerks, gasps, twists his body in a strange mixture of delight and worry. Hannibal watches that he stays conscious.

"You sure know where to look."

Hannibal's eyes flick up, he shrugs one shoulder and brings the pipe to his lips again.

"Youth is easy to tempt into transgression."

"If money could buy brains we would be out of the business," the stranger sighs, brings a hand to Hannibal's face as he had to Will's and taps there, a gesture more closely associated with praising a pet than a person. Regardless, Hannibal takes it as it comes, eyes up and not blinking until the other steps back, looks over his shoulder at the young man curled into a startlingly uncomfortable-looking position.

"He will be fearless," he sighs. "Imagine himself limitless. It's only youth that does that now, you know? I hardly feel the effects."

Will makes a gentle noise that could pass for pleasure, bites his lip and turns wide eyes to Hannibal.

"Get him another bottle, see if he can make it through before he loses himself."

Hannibal meets Will's eyes, holds his attention and intones, softly, "Is that wise?"

A soft sound, not a laugh but something distantly related to it, and far less carefree than the ones before comes from Will as he shivers, shakes his head a little. Heart racing now, pulse quickened past the steady timepiece in his pocket - elation and eagerness, satisfaction and a sudden, intense desire to do something, to feel the opium still thickening in his body and make it move.

The man watches as Will sits up and considers the pipe, chirping, "Have some more. Balance yourself out again." He turns, then, to Hannibal, leaning over him, looming close enough to slide an arm around his shoulder. "Now, you were saying? I believe I asked you to get the kid some wine."

Hannibal's voice is even, gentled still as he watches Will across from him. "I asked if that is wise."

"That's what I thought you said," responds the man, voice pitching a little higher, almost pleased. "And I don't remember asking -"

"He is in debt," Hannibal interjects, "but his father is not. It's how he's able to continue this debauchery and not find himself in a debtor's prison. He's worth a great deal alive, especially so compromised, and worth very little were he to be found dead." Hannibal clears his throat. "Or not found at all."

A considering hum, the man turning back to Will who has barely finished sucking down another lungful of smoke, eyes wide and the smile on his face beyond contented, almost manic in his want and genuine *need* to do something.

"What has the boy done to earn his death sentence?" Hannibal presses, words languid once more, ducking his head to watch the man over the rims of his own glasses, over the rims of the other's.

A scowl and he steps back.

"The rich have no concept of how to use money, spend it wisely, invest it productively." A click of the tongue, fingers up to press the glasses back to his face, hands up after to dishevel already utterly ruined hair. "They are useless."

"In all but their money," Hannibal reminds him, reaches around to take the pipe again, to take a deliberate slow breath before passing it to the other with a sigh.

"Suckle on the riches he offers as you do others. When he's useless to you I'll kill him myself." A groan and Hannibal reclines once more, eyes on Will's in feigned indifference. "He owes me enough."

More consideration at this, a note of genuine displeasure at the inability to end the boy for his own amusement, the proprietor asks, "How many has he had?"

Hannibal languidly holds up three fingers, doesn't blink until the other turns to regard Will.

A sigh that tilts up into a groan of annoyance, spoiled and denied.

"Fine. Fine, no wine." The man shifts, pulling his coat tighter as he circles the table towards Will again. "Don't let him have much more from the pipe. He won't feel it - and then you'll just keep smoking, won't you? Until you go cold."

Will closes his eyes with a harsh shiver as fingers twine through a curl of hair, tugging it just enough to straighten it and let it spring back into place.

"Hannibal," Will breathes, and opens his eyes again. The long hem of a white smoking jacket, just to the thighs, filling his field of vision, sharpened to the point of utter distraction, no eye for movement or subtlety now, overcome by a pinpoint narrowing of attention.

The name draws a laugh, loud, and the man claps a hand against his thigh. "Now that's funny," he exclaims, humor dying away with a chuckle, even as his attention turned on Hannibal does not. "What about him, hmm?"

Will shakes his head, jaw working against clenched teeth, resistance to speaking, a last desperate maneuver of an addled mind to quiet the words that itch in the back of his throat, that drip across his tongue.

"Come on," coaxes the man in white, crouched to look at Hannibal as though from beside Will. "What about him?"

He had felt him, he was certain, Hannibal's hand against his hair, not this man, but now, no, now Hannibal is there, and this man, here, is here, and his coat is so white and it's so improbable that it would be, that it would remain as such, and Will swallows hard. Stills the thoughts to the rhythmic pulse of his pocket watch, vivid against his skin.

"He warned me that you were incorrigible," Will murmurs, hand across his mouth as though to duck a smile.

"Did he now?" As though speaking to a child, false surprise and mouth open in shock. Will shivers again, nods, shakes his head, wriggles until he's arched up off the couch and his eyes are barely open.

"Did he tell you I learned from him?" The man asks, grinning. "Every nasty little thing I do, I learned to do watching him. You have no idea, do you?"

Will makes a sound of displeasure and directs his eyes to Hannibal again.

"Like begets like, my boy. Remember that, Will," he murmurs, eyes lingering steadily on Hannibal as though seeking the unspoken answer with him. When he gets nothing, the man stands, draws Will's head back with another tug to his hair and releases him.

"A very sweet boy. Bring him coherent next time," he tells Hannibal, and then he's gone, passed past them both and away up the stairs, yelling commands in a broken form of the language Hannibal had spoken so fluently. Around them, more patrons have entered the den, more people just as interested in the pipes and utterly uninterested in Hannibal and Will, at the back of the room with their own.

For a long time Hannibal doesn't move, just sits and breathes, lets his head loll to the side against his shoulder as he watches Will fidget and twist, shake his head trying to clear it, that smile still against his lips.

A test passed, an invitation for return and piqued interest. Hannibal will remind the young man of this victory when he's himself once more.

He watches Will grow steadily more impatient and finally pushes himself to sit properly, hands clasped together between his knees, eyes resolutely on Will and not the pipes that rest between them.

"Breathe."

Will shakes his head again, refusal to do any such thing even as, quaking, he draws in a deeper breath. He watches as the man ascends the stairs again, needlepoint precision focused narrowly past the smoke and flames, past Hannibal.

"Will."

A languorous blink, and Will realizes he's stood, snared midstep by Hannibal's voice.

"Sit."

"But that was -"

"Sit." Harsher now, and Will inhales sharp as he feels rough fingers against his wrist and finds himself closer to the stairs than he was a moment before.

Hannibal reels him back with a jerk, into the couch beside him, and Will could laugh for it, puzzled and pleased that for the apparent clarity of his attention, washing against him in waves, he's unable to understand the look in Hannibal's eyes.

Unable and uninterested, in that or any of the information he knows must be showing itself around him. It hardly matters, and now he does laugh, childish delight.

"I want to go," he declares in a hushed stage-whisper, tilting closer to Hannibal, ruddy-cheeked. "It's extraordinary - it's so *still*. I want to go outside again. Will you take me? I can't hear a thing, Hannibal, it's wonderful."

The possibilities seem endless in this balance between entirely awake and with no foreseeable need for sleep, and the radiant optimism that assures Will that any choice he makes now will assuredly be the best one. He could live like this, like the man in white, perhaps he does have enough money to make it so - no need to return to the country now, or ever, really, when he could exist in this place with its soft couches and muffled awareness of all the others and Hannibal, here, to ensure he is safe.

Hannibal glances from Will towards the pipe, mouth working in thought before he regards Will again, who interrupts him with a nearer lean and a lower murmur, close enough now to draw looks that don't earn Will's attention, no sense for anything as tedious as propriety.

"Is it true?"

"Probably not," Hannibal responds readily, watching those around them mill and drape themselves, careful to lower his voice just enough to not seem suspect. "Is what true?"

"About you," murmurs Will, eyes wide and dark with eager fear. "About him."

The effects of this could last for hours before they fade, and the entire time Will would be a danger to himself without aid, his remarkable mind working too quickly, making rash decisions, worse still, following through.

I will not leave you in that den to die.

Hannibal remembers no such promises made him when he'd experienced this, under the man's watchful eye and manic curiosity.

He had been younger but by no means wiser then. But he had had his instructions, his need to prove.

"A lot is true about me, Will," he murmurs, shifts away from the young man nearly draped over him under pretense of getting the pipe once more. Languid, still, but no longer as contented, senses now pulled sharp to maintain control of them despite his body's best efforts to induce laxity and sleep.

The impulse towards the stairs forgotten entirely, Will watches instead the way that Hannibal leans, entirely controlled whereas he feels so delightfully anything but, and draws pale vapor from the pipe again. Still precariously close, feet drawn up into the couch, fascinated in a way he wouldn't allow himself to be were his defenses in place rather than scattered across couch cushions and smoke.

"Tell me," Will whispers. "Tell me something truthful. And something false. Let me see if I can guess them."

He can feel eyes on them now, more intensely than before, and knows with the same assurance with which he knows everything, suddenly, that he poses no greater interest to others than he should merely by being there as he is, already. Reaching for the pipe, he blinks as it's withdrawn from him with an easy movement, Hannibal's eyes on him over the top of his glasses, a lulling patience.

"I can," adds Will, before Hannibal can speak, eyes bright, glassy, a grin curving his lips. "I'm very good at what I do."

A hum of consideration and Hannibal leans back into the couch again, eyes barely open but registering everything, head back to listen to movement upstairs before it stops. He licks his lips.

"I was not born in London -"

"Too simple," Will whines, the sound dropping low into his chest and Hannibal holds up a hand to stop him moving closer to literally press answers from him.

"I was not born in London and nor do I exist here now," he sighs, hums and stretches his legs out across the floor, since the rest of the couch is taken from him to recline on.

"As a young man, I raised horses."

He considers the words as they linger, can feel Will's eyes on him almost like a caress, with how close and hot the gaze is. He wonders if the boy will read the truth from him, if the drugs enhance his ability to see or dull it, fill him with confidence he has yet to earn.

Around them, more and more people take up the available spaces to set themselves into a stupor. Women, men, from young to very old. Within mere moments, more and more will be as close to each other as Will is to him and for the rest of the night it will not matter. Yet still Hannibal shifts when Will moves closer, still he pushes himself to be away from that closeness in favor of taking up the pipe again without any need to inhale.

He will need to take him from here, soon. Outside where he can get some clearer air into his lungs that isn't tainted with grey.

But for now, a pleasing game, entirely distracting, the crowded heady environment that would normally send Will fleeing now worth no more notice than the rain.

He studies Hannibal with that keen awareness, licking his lower lip between his teeth in thought. Broad shoulders, strong coarse hands that Will can readily see wrapped around a leather lead, moving the big stubborn animals around, just as big and stubborn himself.

But Hannibal doesn't have the lines, the weather-wear from that kind of work. Age, a hard life, smoke and stress, certainly but not the burnished copper coarseness of a laborer.

Handsome.

The word appears to Will in a cloud of smoke and dissipates just as quickly. His voice lowers, rough with smoke and the powder that still sticks cloying to the back of his throat.

"You had horses, but you didn't raise them," he decides, grinning, cheeks flushed with pleasure, an assurance born of his own skill heightened by the substances pulsing through his veins. Slouching back, curled languid and feline, Will then adds softly, "Neither of us exist here now."

And neither of them would, in spirit and body, too, if Will kept this up.

The room swells with smoke and sighs and Hannibal pushes himself to stand, calls something in that foreign language again and the kid from earlier returns bearing their coats and hats. Hannibal tips him, bends to murmur something in his ear and the kid nods vigorously and trots back upstairs. Hannibal watches him with a furrowed brow before tossing Will's coat over him in implication. He dons his own in silence.

As Will fumbles with the confusion of his sleeves and laughs when he manages them, Hannibal leans over the bar and under it for the pitcher of water, snagging a glass and pouring it full, water sloshing from the sides when he miscalculates. It goes into Will's eager hands when the other steps up.

"Drink," he says, watching Will start and set the glass down midway. "All of it."

He needed to wash that powder away, he needed to fill his body with something living and fresh, not fermented and burned and broken.

Without a word he takes a bottle of wine, too, a tilt of his head apparently the only payment needed for the barman to give it up. He takes a drink, slow and long, from the mouth of it before moving towards the door, knowing Will would follow.

Outside, to Will's utter dismay, he tips the contents into the gutter.

"Walk," he sighs, one hand up against his eyes, under the glasses, to rub them. "Take as deep breaths as you can."

"Why," Will sighs, a mournful plea as the perfectly good wine is swept away by rain and filth into the gutter. He stands for a moment to watch it go, lips pursed in some addled thought that goes neither here nor there, and sets his hat on his head again.

He does breathe, very deeply when he remembers to do so, searching for the stars again and drinking in the air that feels so much less heavy than before - than it ever really does here, in the crush and grind of industry roiling thick around them. A sigh, a sweet sort of longing, for the country again, for the stars curling across the sky, for the air so crisp that you can taste it.

"Will."

That familiar voice to tug him back to earth again, smiling towards Hannibal and running a hand over his face, flushed and remarkably warm for the chill rain still falling.

"I would gladly have shared it," he offers, as though it could somehow be retrieved, trotting closer to walk alongside Hannibal, rather than behind. Focused on him, entirely, the man at his side who held to his word and did not leave Will there to die. As though it were sunlit spring in Hyde Park, and not dour winter in the Rookery. The sensation of risk, of danger, appears as distant as a passing breeze, barely noticed past his curious attention on Hannibal.

"You didn't need any more," Hannibal assures him gently as they set off, walking, Hannibal with shoulders hunched and hands deep in his pockets against the rain, Will entirely open to it, head up and blinking as the rain lands in his eyes.

"I don't feel drunk at all," comes the pleased response, and Hannibal sighs, lifts his head as well and allows the rain, dank and dirty, to land against his face as well.

"I know," he sighs. He remembers the feeling of invincibility, the endless desire to never sleep, to never fully wake, to just work and plan and run and never, ever stop. He remembers how it had felt to be a god until the drugs ran from his system like tar and ash and left him curled in on himself and sobbing. He remembers the promise of more and his deal with the devil.

A few blocks from the den, he tosses the bottle into a pile of garbage already writhing with rats.

“The sky here is nothing like the country,” Will muses, turning on his heel and then turning again before taking a few tripping steps to catch up to Hannibal as he walks. “In the country there are stars that never end. You can rest on your back on a fallen log and watch them, just there.” He points up, as though magically the clouds would lift and show them. “As they appear one after another after another, and soon the sky is white with them and yet it’s still night.”

Hannibal listens, lets his eyes close as they walk to imagine, to fall into the sweet dream Will narrates.

He shakes himself to consciousness with a sigh and presses a hand to his eyes once more.

“You’ll catch your death,” he mutters, tired, on every level of his being, from the evening. They had achieved their task, Will his, to infiltrate and be allowed to return, Hannibal his, to bring the boy out safe, to keep his mind from swallowing him up. Yet there is the coiling, lingering sense of unease, of Hannibal’s knowledge of the man so determined to watch Will struggle with himself, that he will try again and do worse next time.

He knows as little of Will’s assignment as Will does of Hannibal’s, yet their goal is the same one: for that man to lose his power to another within, another more easily controlled and negotiated with. Someone with a mind for business, not a taste for destruction. A flip of the coin to return power to the honest police, yet keep the crooked ones satisfied.

The underworld was the city’s heartbeat. It could not be ceased, but it could be controlled.

“I will walk you to your street,” Hannibal tells Will, watches the way his eyes widen, his cheeks brighten at the words and wonders more about the boy, wonders why his heart feels heavier for that thought, too. “If you direct me.”

Enthused by the promise of this particular adventure, at carrying the marvelous weight in his limbs with energy enough for that and more, Will sidles alongside Hannibal, all but glowing in the amber radiance of the gas lamps that gutter in the rain.

"Where did you learn Turkish?"

An instant of hesitation, a quick inventory of the man beside him, and Hannibal decides to simply shrug. "In Turkey."

Will's grin widens, scarcely noticing when Hannibal levels a solemn look towards two youths that begin to amble towards them, and then think better of it. They circle for a moment like hyenas, eager for a taste of prey but not brave enough to come near the lion for it.

"Liar," Will laughs. There's hardly an effort in sussing out the truth now, especially when everything seems to be just that.

Not disagreeing, Hannibal hums around a cigarette, drawn from a rumpled carton in his coat, wooden match flaring acrid to life. "Exposure," he responds, cigarette held between a curl of lips, more grey to fill him, and draw that colorlessness out of the dreary damp.

"I was right, though, wasn't I?"

Hannibal keeps his eyes downcast but alert, aware even with the heaviness still rolling through him in leaden waves. "About?"

Will grins a little. "The horses."

"Do you think yourself to be?"

"Accurate?"

"Yes."

"I do," Will confirms, and then adds, "and you know me to be as well."

"Quite so," agrees Hannibal softly, following Will's lead as they curve onto a more lit street than the last, less muck around their feet, street wide enough to allow for horses, carriages.

Will doesn't ask him who he really is, then. Where he comes from, how he arrived here. Better always not to know, better now to imagine, even, foreign lands of dust and deserts, his country home and boundless stars, altogether to imagine and it's all he can do not to close his eyes and simply let the images come.

"Will we go back soon?" Will asks, and a flicker of thought follows it, pulled from the vapors. "He means me harm, doesn't he?"

Hannibal hesitates.

"Yes," he says at last, whether answering Will's first question or the second it is difficult to say. He doesn't elaborate, and with a sigh, Will doesn't confirm it. He knows his answer. He knows the yes is for both.

"He does not trust without testing," Hannibal adds after a moment, another long drag of his cigarette before exhaling, tilting his head up to breathe smoke into the rain as it falls. "And he does not test with simple things."

"Did he test you?"

"Yes."

"Did you pass?"

"No." Amusement in Hannibal's answer and a sidelong glance at his companion. Will presses his lips together in a false frown before straightening his shoulders.

"Liar."

"That is quite a gift."

It's soft amusement, dry humor that keeps them distracted and moving, keeps Will from wanting to stand in the middle of the street, arms spread and head up howling at the unseen moon. Close enough when he removes his hat to shake the water from it and toss back his hair. Will runs a hand down his face to clear it of water, blinking wide-eyed down the main thoroughfare at which they find themselves.

Late - or early - enough that there are few enough reasons to be out in these quarters, for any but those with illicit intentions, and the streets rendered further emptied by the weather.

It's lovely, in a way, and when his eyelashes are just a little heavy with rain, the glow of lights above and their reflections off the sidewalks below nearly look like stars.

"Are you near?" asks Will.

"I'm here," Hannibal assures him, a dry pique of humor, watching with a feint at suffering as Will plucks the cigarette from between his fingers in retribution.

"Your residence, I mean. Is it near?" No more detail than that, no more desired, as Will takes a drag and tries not to cough with the harshness of it, returning it just as quickly.

Distant amusement, but very tired, as Hannibal sets it back between his lips and pockets his hands. "Near enough. Back towards where we came from."

"Hell."

"Nearer still to that."

Will hums, that brightness in his eyes again as he nods up the road on which they stand. "I'm just up Shoreditch, not terribly far." A chill breeze as his mind works in every direction and none in particular, not a breeze that moves his clothing but one that prickles up his spine. Risk. Danger.

"If you'd like -" Will hesitates, interrupts himself. "Whist, perhaps. Until the rain passes."

Hannibal hums, considers, as though on cue the rain around them increases to a torrent, freezing and deeply unpleasant. He doesn't bother ashing his cigarette, simply flicks it to the gutter where it splutters and dies.

It is not unheard of to call on a friend.

It is somewhat suspicious to call on one so late, and people had too much time in the evening for gossip and lies. In London, lies spread like a disease, few were left untouched. And few lies were harmless.

"It may not be wise," he begins, considering, for a moment, what would happen should he leave Will to himself, as he is. He is coherent enough, walks without aid, yet the gleam is still bright in his eyes to do something, to test the limits of the drug that makes one feel as though they have none.

A sigh, lost in the rain, as Will adds, "In this weather your are likely to drown trying to get home."

And likely to cause you hell going to yours.

"Each game you win is another I stay for," Hannibal says finally, "Once the victory is mine I will see you well and go on my way."

A compromise.

It truly was utterly dreadful weather.

The drug would spread itself through Will's blood for perhaps another hour, longer if he was unlucky, and Hannibal is wont to leave him simply for that.

Delight, carried on another easy laugh, as Hannibal agrees and Will claps him on the shoulder, turning to walk. Not playing a role now but every bit the part - youthful enthusiasm to the point of folly, no sign of the wise reservation of their first meetings.

Freed from cautious restraint, hard-earned. Freed from a skill utilized in only the most laden circumstances. Freed from exhaustion, from anxiety or stress. But the dark circles beneath his eyes remain, the pallor brought to a lively flush only by the racing of his heart, spurred into a thoughtless pleasure in everything around him.

Dangerous pleasure, for one who is so oft burdened by those same thoughts now so easily avoided with a curl of smoke and a puff of powder.

The lodging house is passable, and in being so, a far cry better than those a mere few blocks past. Residential, furnished as a home rather than a catch-all for whomever could scrape together enough pennies to stay for the night. Will allows himself in, up the stairs past several rooms with doors firmly closed, to the utmost floor.

"The owners are friendly to us," he says, by way of explanation for the warm accommodations, as he tips off his hat to hang and makes his way to the paraffin lamps, filling the room with a sallow glow one at a time.

Small, but comfortable enough for one, with slanted ceilings and an overstuffed mattress - fiber, rather than straw, covered with blankets to shield from the drafty window overlooking the street beneath. A wooden chair, beside a small table, layered peculiarly high with papers.

Will glances towards Hannibal as he unsolders his coat, almost surreptitious if not for the fact he's incapable of being anything of the sort right now.

"What was it?"

Hannibal's brow raises in response, and Will shakes his head a little, as though to rattle the words back into place.

"Your test," suggested with soft curiosity, persistent.

Hannibal takes a breath and holds it, considers his response, considers the consequences of revealing such a thing to Will, here, now. Though he wonders, truly, how much Will is going to remember in the morning, beneath the agony of his headache, the lingering desire for this freedom again.

It had taken Hannibal many weeks to be able to recall events at will, after nights like this. And he can, now, well.

"I took what you had," he says. "But a great deal more. I couldn't feel my hands. I believed I could fly. I was encouraged to," he shrugs.

"The man amuses himself watching others experience the balms of his making. Perhaps it is the only way he can experience them himself, now, body burned through with use and greed for more."

"Did you fly?" Will asks, a small smile tilting his mouth.

Hannibal huffs a breath.

"I fell," he admits. "I spent the better part of a week in that den recovering, upstairs." he tilts his head as though to gesture, before remembering they're no longer there. Will seems content to accept the gesture regardless. Hannibal's jaw works gently and he shakes his head in a smooth motion. He had spent the week recovering. The man had spent the week feeding him a cocktail of powders and liquids, keeping the pipe so close Hannibal couldn't resist the use of it to dull the pain.

"A test well worth its torment," he assures Will quietly, "and one I have never seen him administer since."

"Some small comfort, then," Will responds, not unkindly, a recognition of the information that slips from his grasp just as quickly, unburdened by it as he might normally be. Surely no such thing will happen to him, and of course their line of work involves particular risks, and Hannibal is well now, and all manner of warm assurances heat through Will's chest, melting away any tension there as quickly as the wax in the candles.

"I might even consider myself quite lucky in light of that," he continues, extending a hand to take Hannibal's coat as he shrugs out of the damp, heavy material. "I've certainly never undertaken a test this pleasurable. Even most of my pleasures aren't this pleasurable."

The coat is hung, hat beside it, and Will turns to stand nearly toe to toe with the older man, incorrigibly pleased as he turns his face upwards to meet his eyes, made bold.

"We did well," murmurs Will, though he can hardly remember the evening now, the terse words exchanged over and around him, nearly graspable but why? It matters so little when he feels so full to bursting with anticipation. "And the next time? More of the same?"

Hannibal regards him with hooded eyes before taking half a step back to distance them. He notices the bare flicker of something like disappointment in Will's eyes and wonders if his memory has started to slip from him like sand already.

“Deal,” he sighs, a gentle let down to a young man who knows no better, now, who will not remember better in the morning. He allows a smile.

“I am determined to make my claim of your owing to me legitimate. The best lies stem from truths.”

“I have won twice and you once,” Will reminds him, and Hannibal’s smile widens.

“Deal the cards, Will. And we will see if next time my lie can’t be a truth.”

Will tugs the table over, the chair with it. Fingers find the buttons of his waistcoat, quick hands slide it from his shoulders to lay aside, and he slides onto the end of the bed opposite where Hannibal slowly takes his seat. A curious sensation, watching Hannibal from the sides of his eyes as he shuffles the cards. Desire, without definition, and so, remaining unsatisfied.

And just as quickly, the feeling passes - hunger without food, thirst without a drink to quench it, and soon forgotten in the flutter-flick of cards. He wins the first, and loses the second, the first unhappiness he's shown in hours despite how near indeed the wolves came, and a curt sigh puffed past his lips.

"Must you?"

"I must."

A simple enough reply, but insufficient for Will, uncertain as to what happens when Hannibal is gone. Unable to imagine it.

"With whom will I play cards?" Will asks, as Hannibal pushes in his chair.

"You will sleep."

"I have no interest -"

"Sleep," a softer voice this time, lulling, and Will’s fingers twist against the cards, shuffling them back and forth.

Hannibal smiles, faintly, at the sound. "Small comforts, Will. You are here in your bed, warm, and I did not leave you to him or to your own thoughts. You will sleep and you will dream extraordinary things."

"But couldn't y-" Will stops himself, and simply swallows before lightening his tone, more effort required to do so, now. "Yes. Thank you for the company. The watchful eye."

He lifts his own, the blue just returning to them now after lightless darkness swallowed it all whole. "Soon?"

Hannibal pauses in reaching for his coat, settling his hat on his head before nodding.

“Next week we go again,” he assures him, after a pause he adds, “I am rarely far from the inn on Monday nights and Wednesdays.”

An invitation, a gentle thing to leave with the boy already returning to himself. Hannibal will spare him the humiliation of being there when the tears come, when the feeling of invincibility wears off, when the body starts to ache for another hit and the mind understands that it should not have one.

He leaves without another word, but he hears Will wish him well before the door swings closed.

It takes Hannibal several minutes to convince himself to leave. As much the rain as the young man he's leaving behind to deal with the low on his own for the first time. In the end, he trusts the boy's strength of will not to waver, and quietly takes the stairs.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

"Hannibal Lecter, royalty of the Rookery and arbiter of taste," Mason retorts, clicking the consonants with a vicious pleasure. "You know better than anyone that my tastes only run as far as what I *want*. If I want you here on a whistle and a snap of my fingers, I'll have it. If I want you here to listen to me talk about my proclivities, then I'll have that." A thin smile, now, drawing into his coat with comfortably folded arms. "And if I want him, then I'll have that, too."

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: references to drug use, references to child abuse, references to incest, general all-around cruelty and madness

Welcome to Mason Verger, everyone.

In the early mornings, the doors are opened for the den to air, the smoke allowed to seep outside to mingle with the vile one of industry. Within, the floors are swept, the tables straightened and the couches adjusted to be pristine once more, for the next evening and the people it will bring.

For most of the day, the ones at the very back of the den are taken up by those that work there, taking their time to rest in relative comfort and quiet until they're called on again.

One of the young boys is crouched outside, Tarik, he thinks, washing the pipes with a smooth silk cloth when Hannibal steps up. He doesn't see the boy often, but he knows his face, and the other smiles at him when Hannibal ruffles his hair and pushes the door open with his shoulder.

Orphans, most, or as good as, with parents in debtor's prison if not worse. Scraped up easily from rag-picking for a couple extra coins a week, allowed to sleep across the couches for the few hours between cleaning and work, and occasionally, taken upstairs to become a personal serving boy to the proprietor.

For as often as he needs a new one, Hannibal can only imagine what that entails.

"They do have elegant little fingers, don't they?"

A boisterous exclamation, carrying into the room as though from inside Hannibal's head. He turns his attention towards the man on the stairs, wrapped in his pristinely white smoking jacket, a rare color anywhere in this city. He observes Hannibal observing one of the boys and lifts his chin, a jaunty angle.

"Good for cleaning out ash," Hannibal agrees.

"Good for more than that." A curious lilt to his voice, probing, testing, as ever.

Hannibal simply hums in response, hands in his pockets and only a sparing glance towards the pipes, yet unused today. "You wanted to see me."

"Want is a strong word," comes the quick retort, as the man turns back up the stairs, expecting Hannibal to follow.

He does, several stairs behind, into the office that doubles as a living space. An exorbitant bed in the corner, piled thickly with down blankets left in disarray, a broad desk in the center of the space, an armoire from a time and place far more comfortable than this. Hannibal seats himself, watching passively as the proprietor circles around him, fingertips trailing Hannibal's shoulders as he drops into the plush chair behind the desk.

His hands clap together and he folds them over his knee, legs crossed and pale blue eyes particularly sharp despite the mirth he forces into their corners.

"What can I do fo--"

"No," the interruption is sharp, the man leaning in a little towards Hannibal. "Not yet, it would be terribly rude, wouldn't it, to just jump right into business? Tell me. Hannibal. How have you *been*?"

Talks like this were common, the man determined to think himself subtle with his needling and queries. Hannibal endures it well enough, beyond tilting his head and taking a breath he shows no signs of displeasure.

"How can one be in London?" he asks him dryly. "The rain has kept me awake, Mason, as I'm sure it has you."

"Mmm, yes. What was it that lovely boy of yours said? 'Dreadful'?" A laugh, lilting and high, and Mason leans back further into the chair, almost sinking into it in his delight. "I still can't get over the expressions here, even the lowest classes sound pompous."

Hannibal just blinks. Predictably, the words don't slow. At least in one British mannerism Mason was proficient: an inquest into one's health was only a spark to set fire to the burn of Mason's own answer.

"I, myself, never sleep anymore. Sleep is so *boring*. Sleep takes time out of my day I can't afford to waste. Busy, busy, busy, I am a businessman after all."

Hannibal's eyes slip to the unmade bed, he imagines the writhing of bodies upon it that would get it to that state and looks away again.

"Business is going well." It's not a question, and Hannibal leans back in his chair, unfolding into a straighter posture with a slow inhale, hands clasped in front of him resting just above his belt as he regards his employer.

"It is, in fact, going well," Mason replies. "The opportunities for corruption are simply boundless for a city that's already so rotten. You'd think we'd run out of possibilities," he laughs, a little too loudly, "but then they show up as pretty as you please and just throw themselves across my couches. Begging, Hannibal. Positively *begging*."

Waiting, eyes sharp, watching for any reaction from Hannibal and receiving none, he tilts his chair back and forth a few times and suddenly stops, palms slapping hard against the desk.

"Or sighing. *Your name*. Hannibal, he sighed."

No subtlety now - a demand, expectant with all the air of a lord. Indeed, considering himself as one, at least of this, carved out of the desperation and wreckage of the neighborhood around him.

Hannibal's lips purse, pensive, and he yields a sigh, this much enough to merit a look of perverse pleasure from the man across from him.

"His tolerance is every bit that of any other child of wealth, and this, his first time upon the pipe. He sighs my name only because he does not know yours."

"Yet," Mason adds, agreeably. "Tell me, where does someone like you find something like that?"

"He has as little control of himself here as he does at any card table," comes the calm reply. "I frequent many. He found me when I took his money."

"And yet he is devoted to you," Mason drawls, moving to rest his hands clasped together on the desk, elbows down and body leaning forward to regard Hannibal through his glasses. "Follows you like a little dog, takes what you give him."

"As easily as he takes what you give him," Hannibal shrugs, ducking his head to remove his own glasses to clean them against his shirt. "As all youth he is reckless, as all rich youth he is more determined to prove his own immortality."

"Innocent, sweet thing," Mason laughs, the sound starting low in his throat before breaking free of his lips, pleased and, again, far too loud for the room they share.

Hannibal returns his glasses to his face and raises his eyes.

"Did you call me here to discuss your proclivities, Mason?" he asks. "I am well aware of them. Take the boy if you want him so much. Though he seems a little old for your particular taste, no?"

"Hannibal Lecter, royalty of the Rookery and arbiter of taste," Mason retorts, clicking the consonants with a vicious pleasure. "You know better than anyone that my tastes only run as far as what I *want*. If I want you here on a whistle and a snap of my fingers, I'll have it. If I

want you here to listen to me talk about my proclivities, then I'll have that." A thin smile, now, drawing into his coat with comfortably folded arms. "And if I want him, then I'll have that, too."

A conversational tone now, reassured with an absolute certainty, but he continues, patient, as though explaining to one of the little boys downstairs. "You stopped me from having my fun. Do you understand what *stress* feels like? All the things I do for you? How hard I have to work to keep you in your pipes? And I try to blow off a little steam, you know - a little pressure - and you stopped that from happening."

"You would have killed him."

"No. Maybe. Probably," he agrees, not particularly concerned by it. "What's your point?"

"The blood of the rich is better drained slowly, as to be savored, rather than suddenly, and wasted," Hannibal intones, match flaring to life to light the cigarette held between his lips.

"Hannibal, I don't know if your backwater corner of the Empire has any of the modern amenities of good old London, but do you know what happens when steam pipes don't have a release valve?"

Hannibal buries the tension in his jaw beneath a long pull off the cigarette. "They burst," he answers around it.

"They burst. They burst and steam goes everywhere and it's hot and it's *destructive*, Hannibal. You took my release valve away from me, and the result is going to be messy if I don't get it back."

A languid blink in reply, a hand up to take the cigarette away from Hannibal's lips, holding it between the middle knuckles of his fingers when he draws it down, thumb tapping the filter, barely damp from his mouth.

He concentrates on feigning indifference.

Mason's hunger for death and violence is immeasurable, perhaps even insatiable, and he has honed in on Will Graham like a bloodhound with a scent. Wanting the boy harm, now, for no other reason than to see him suffer - because *Hannibal* had him first and he needs to break the favourite new toy in the playground.

"If you want, then take," Hannibal responds, head tilted down to regard Mason over the rims of his glasses before he brings the cigarette back to his lips and blinks as the smoke obscures the other man from him. "There is precious little you are better at than taking something you feel is rightfully yours."

He imagines Will, those blue eyes wide with the prospect of having to keep his cover through this, of having to not only endure but enjoy, under the duress of his mind's slipping hold on reason and consciousness as Mason feeds him powder and pain.

He knows Will would do it, mouth shut and smile pressed to his face as though into wax.

“Everything that comes into this den is mine, Hannibal,” Mason nods, almost sagely, “Those boys come in, for coins, for a place to sleep, they’re mine. Those men with their twisted tongues and torrid ways, mine. And you,” Mason grins, taps the tips of his fingers together. “All mine.”

He fidgets, and Hannibal wonders how much of the cocaine is in his system this morning, how much he had had the night before.

“They all learn to jump through hoops, like dogs at the circus. I say jump,” Mason gestures, “and you fall out the window.”

The laugh is boisterous, utterly shameless and loud, and Hannibal exhales slowly through his nose before flicking the end of the cigarette with his thumbnail. He allows a smile, swallows.

“And that boy will jump,” Mason continues, tone back to the cool businesslike smoothness of before, moods and nuances shifting like the man containing them, restless and uncontrollable. “He will jump, Hannibal, and he will crawl for me.”

“I’m bringing him in tomorrow,” Hannibal reminds him passively, tongue pressing soft just behind his top lip to slip over a tooth. “And he will crawl. But heed me not to kill him.”

A considering gaze before Hannibal blinks and looks away, eyes out the window he had once leaned out of, body trembling and eyes wide.

“Not yet.”

Any energy invested - to harm the boy or to prevent it - would bait the proprietor like fresh blood on the trail, and so Hannibal remains placid. Indifferent, to the man across from him, because truly, it does not matter what Hannibal desires.

"You know I will," Mason responds.

It matters, for now, what Mason wants.

"Kill him? Of course."

And it matters what Will needs.

"Not that," Mason sighs, almost light-hearted as he teases. "Do try to keep up. I will heed you, Hannibal - you know I will - at least until I don't."

Hannibal ashes his cigarette again, smoke coiling against his lips.

"I mean, what good is a guard dog if you don't listen when it barks?" Mason explains, fingers ticking against the desk as his eyes focus upward, following the cracks in the ceiling. "I trust you, Hannibal. I really, really do. You know I'd never even met a Russian before you? I had not an inkling of whether you people are honest or not -"

"I'm not."

Mason blinks, turning back towards Hannibal.

"Russian," Hannibal adds around his cigarette.

A laugh, loud and genuinely pleased, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Close enough. They won the war, so you're whatever they say you are. Just like here. You must be predisposed to submission."

"Predisposed to making good decisions," Hannibal suggests instead. "Leaving there. Investing here."

Mason considers it, fingers steepled in front of his mouth. He does, honestly, appear more often than not to enjoy Hannibal's company, inasmuch as Mason enjoys anything. Someone to abuse who will not retaliate. Someone to be honest with him in a way that most others rightfully fear to do. The nearest enough thing Mason has to a friend in any sense of the word, but even that won over by force of pain and fire.

"How is the money, Mason?"

A twitch of displeasure in his lips, nothing more.

Hannibal hums, brings up a hand to rub his eyes and tilts his head back in an arch of the neck. An easy advantage, then, for now. While Hannibal brought money in, Mason could not kill him without crippling his business.

He is careful not to assign ownership to the money either.

It is too early in the morning for a tantrum, though perhaps those outside would be grateful for a piece of this expensive furniture to be flung into the filthy street. Firewood, if anything else, for when the rain turns to sleet.

"Don't do that," Mason whines, "that noise you make when you feel something is amiss, it's fine. We're fine. The place runs."

"And I bring you a fine selection of idiots with purses weighing down their common sense," Hannibal adds, adopting a similar tone, the cigarette back between his lips as Mason laughs.

"Yes! You do. You *do*. And a good partnership runs like a smooth engine. All parts working together to keep the mechanism moving and turning and twisting, pushing *forward*."

The cigarette is put out between Hannibal's fingers and with a sigh he sits forward.

"While excess steam necessitates valves to prevent explosion, it only works correctly with enough steam built up to power it," Hannibal intones. "Too much, it bursts. Too little, and the engine ceases to function."

He smiles, wan.

"You must allow some pressure to build, Mason, to power the mechanisms. Only then does the release satisfy a purpose, once the machinery is in motion."

"The conductor and the owner," Mason chirps, leaning back in his chair again with a series of squeaks as it rocks. "You get your hands dirty, and I enjoy the ride, and together we make sure there's smoke pouring out of our stacks. Your stacks *especially*," he adds, laughing.

"They are the coal," Hannibal responds easily, settled now into the same placid consolations he's accustomed to offering when Mason begins his day so early. "No more."

"And we provide the flame."

"Yes."

"Good. Very, very good," Mason sighs, clapping his hands together, and folding his fingers over his stomach as he turns lightly in his chair. "Now if only we could make sure we were free of any," he searches for the word, runs his tongue along his teeth in a gesture to soothe gums reddened by his powders. "Any problems. Problems we can foresee. Maybe even - let's call them problems we have foreseen, and have not yet resolved."

Hannibal rests his elbows against his knees, lips pursing. He doesn't say the name, knows that it's always bringing a match to tinder to do so, without certainty as to whether it's dampened with water or kerosene.

"It's my only concern, really," he assures Hannibal. "This boy, the money, all of it fine, really. But," he starts, and reroutes his words. "Do you ever come into a room, and you don't see that anyone's there, but you just *know*? You can feel them in the air."

A soft sound of agreement, but no more commitment than that, a precarious edge to navigate now.

"I can feel her," Mason declares softly. "Even though I can't see her, I know she's here."

"Sharing a womb remains a mentality once the physical act of doing so has passed."

Mason had only ever brought his sister up by name once. Hannibal can't know what he was on to be so open but he remembers.

"Yes, and then people expect you to *keep sharing* Hannibal. And you do. You ache to and you try and suddenly, one day, you're sharing too much. The sharing becomes unwelcome, and then?" he sighs, as though put upon. "Father did try to stop it but she is a very headstrong girl. I had to try and teach her."

Hannibal watches him a moment more before pushing himself to stand, to walk to the window and work it open on squeaking hinges. The air hits him cold, rotten, but clearer still than the fog that hangs within the room.

"Never knew when to keep what was good for her and cut her losses when they happened."

"As persistent as you are," Hannibal murmurs, barely loud enough to hear, himself, before adding, louder. "You do not know she is even in London."

"I can smell her," Mason snarls, teeth briefly clenching. Hannibal wonders how early Mason's day actually began, whether night had simply blended into morning for him, the way smoothed by powder.

"Mason." A quieter tone now, but no less firm than before. "Don't you think that someone would have seen her? One of the boys, one of your patrons?" He shrugs mildly, "Or me."

"My guard dog," Mason responds, easing back a little, but still his hands stretch and knot into fists, again and again.

Hannibal hums. "Yes. And nothing has caught my scent."

"You don't know the stink of her," Mason shudders. "Worse than any filth this city's produced."

"Last we heard, she was in America, still, setting up shops in Five Points with the Chinese. Running out the Irish. What business would she have here?"

"She is greedy. She would want what I have, just like I want what she has."

"Do you?"

"In America? God bless it, no. Horrible place, no better than here but with none of the sense of class structure," he shudders. "Always in revolt. She loves it, stirring the pot just to see the mess she can make."

"Then what interest in this," Hannibal murmurs, careful now. "Why not let you have it?"

"Because taking it back is what I would do," Mason answers, surprisingly lucid for an instant before he waves his hand. "You wouldn't understand. You don't have family. This is like trying to make one of the orphans call me papa, they don't even know the word."

Hannibal keeps silent on the matter, turns back to stare out the window as the rain threatens from the sky but doesn't fall, just weights and greys the clouds.

"You think the boy is from her?"

"I think if she wanted to take me she would do it through stealth. Infiltration, rather than brute force. And bringing in a charming, innocent little thing like that -"

"It's what you would do."

"Precisely, yes," Mason grins, seems pleased that Hannibal is now following the conversation and not leading it. For his part, Hannibal just shrugs.

"But she's not you. Still in America, making investments elsewhere. No mind for business like her brother."

He shuts the window with a snap, locks it, turns.

"You will become a self fulfilling prophecy, Mason, if you give so much energy to this. Leave her where she is, as she has left you where you are."

A blink, then a laugh, a low deep sound and Mason arches in his seat before sitting forward to rest his clasped hands against the desk.

"Oh you are *good*, Hannibal, very much a dog trained to please his master. But you are a fool."

"And fools were once the only people able to speak the truth to their king without retribution. The only ones heeded." Hannibal walks languidly back to his chair, sits carefully in it before spreading his arms in a gesture of passivity. "But, I don't have a family."

"No," Mason confirms with a crooked smile, "you have me, though. Isn't that lucky?"

He pushes against the arms of the chair to stand and skims his fingers along the desk's edge, circling nearer to Hannibal. Directly in front of him, he sits on the edge of the brightly polished rosewood, feet swinging and hands clasped between his knees.

"I should send you to kill her."

Hannibal rolls a shoulder in a languid shrug. "I would scarcely know where to find her, but if you wish me to go to New York," he suggests, but is cut off sharply.

"No," Mason snaps. "No, I can't have you off your leash that long. Besides, who only knows what kind of chicanery she'd manage to get into your head."

"So you do believe her to be in America, then," Hannibal considers, and Mason regards him narrowly, fingers unclenching to rub anxious, clammy palms against his thighs.

"Mason," Hannibal continues, leaning forward, elbows on his knees and palms pressed together as though in supplication - pleading, a prayer. "Clever though you both may be, she is not so clever that she can be in two places at once. The boy is from the country - you can hear it in his voice. He's few enough times been to London, let alone America. Do you remember what happened three weeks ago? The little Black Irish?"

Lips pursing, Mason folds his arms, bodily resistance that doesn't carry over to his voice. "Hannibal, he was stealing from me."

Hannibal's brow lifts and he needs say nothing more before Mason sighs.

"I *thought* he was stealing from me."

"And?"

"And I made him pay for it in teeth," exclaims Mason, exasperated. "He doesn't need them now, and they were just the little ones, they'll grow back in!"

"That isn't the point," Hannibal says softly. "You know the medications make you fearful. Paranoid. How long have you been awake?"

Mason puffs a breath up through his blonde hair and counts off on his fingertips before resolving himself. "It'll be three days at tea time." Watching as Hannibal starts to stand, Mason extends a hand.

Cool, soft fingers curl against Hannibal's cheek, and Mason sweeps his thumb across Hannibal's mouth, rough against his lips until they part enough for him to feel Hannibal's teeth against the pad of his finger.

"He'll have to die, one way or another," responds Mason with a sigh, almost pitying, but for whom, it isn't clear.

"We all have to die," Hannibal replies, eyes up, keeping contact as he slowly leans back and stands fully. "One way or another."

Mason drops his hand and keeps watching him, legs swinging under the table in a way that is almost childish if he wasn't so jumpy, entire body poised and coiled to spring at something, or out somewhere if it's not contained quickly or diverted.

"Get some sleep."

"He said your name so softly," Mason continues, as though the rest of the conversation hadn't happened, as though he remembers none of it, as though none of it matters - and Hannibal wonders, again, why he gets called to these meetings, if they serve any purpose beyond giving Mason someone to talk to who can give him an answer without fear of losing their teeth.

"Sighed it. Like a lover."

"You start to court the pipe in your stupor," Hannibal dismisses, blinks, sets one foot behind the other but doesn't move closer to the door.

"Yes, but he said *your name*."

"Teach him yours tomorrow and he will sigh it instead."

Another laugh, another oddly deep, pleased thing that makes the hair at the back of Hannibal's neck stand on end.

"I will make him scream it," Mason says, slipping from the desk and circling it again, giving Hannibal his back, and thus permission to leave the room, even when he continues speaking. "Better yet - I'll make you do it."

"Scream?"

"Won't that be the day!" Mason barks a laugh and sets his palm against the desk with a sharp slap again. "I have yet to make you do anything but curse. And I have tried many things in my bag of tricks on you."

Hannibal draws a breath slowly, holds it.

“No,” Mason continues, dropping himself into his chair again and leaning back with a squeak. “You will make him scream it. But not now. I want to play first. He is such a pretty thing.”

Without another word, Mason gestures, a dismissive flick of his wrist, and pulls a stack of papers from his desk to rest on his knees. Sated for the moment by his own words, his own fantasies.

Hannibal swallows, turns on his heel and takes the steps quickly, through the near-empty den, past the sleeping kids and workers, and out into the dirty street. It has yet to start to rain but it hardly matters. When it does it would just as quickly wash away the meagre contents of Hannibal’s stomach, emptied against the side of the building in shuddering, painful retches, as it would the rest of the filth of the city.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"Hardly fair to lay the burden of libertinism on me when it has so entirely been by your encouragement," Will muses. His eyes darken a little, hooded by long lashes, the childish effervescence simmering lower now, warm as the embers that heat their pipes. "I was destined for a life of simple comforts, before you."

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: drug use (there's rather a theme to this series) and surprise affection

An anticipation builds like a nervous string symphony, over a matter of days. Little plucks at first, notes to break the stillness, and more by the day. Bows added, rosin-sticky like smoke, thick and heady when each day closed and another opened. Tremolo shudders, as Will imagined meeting Hannibal again, cigarette between his lips and expression inscrutable.

It is beyond melody, when the day itself arrives, a cacophony of discord with every movement that does not bring Will nearer there. Nearer him.

He tries to hear another song. Tells himself it's nerves, not excitement. Dread, not delight. And he's glad that no one but he can hear these lies when he sees Hannibal waiting for him on Bethnal Green, and all his deceits become so starkly transparent.

It helps to play the role of one so naive. Will's sudden bright grin, the hop in his step to carry him there faster, to where Hannibal watches his approach from beneath the copper illumination of a street lamp, hands shoved in the pockets of his sack coat, and shoulders hunched against the rain.

An act, surely an act.

"Hello," Will exclaims, far louder than he means to, and catches his lower lip between his teeth to stop himself from saying more. A glance towards one side of the street - comfortably middle-class, government buildings rising high in the distance - and the other - darker, shadowed, with streets that spiral and split into innumerable alleyways and dead ends that have more often than not earned their name.

“You seem well,” observes Hannibal in response, drawing away the stub of cigarette to crush against the damp ground. He knows the light in Will’s eyes, the pull of the pipe that promises more than it ever truly yields, and turns away from it. The flush in Will’s cheeks certainly from the cold, the enthusiasm merely the work of one doing their job.

Certainly, it must be.

They go and as they do, Will’s laughter fills the narrow streets, carries up through buildings like rising steam, an unexpected warmth in a place that offers so little. Reminiscences about games unplayed together, moments not shared, stories built and spun from Will’s own imagination, overactive in the aching long week apart.

The door opens for them both when they arrive.

Where the proprietor is today is anyone’s guess. There is no creaking of the floorboards upstairs and Hannibal feels his shoulders ease from their tension. He watches Will purchase them both a drink - this time not the full bottle - sees the way another patron raises a hand in greeting, not to him but to Will, remembering his generosity with the liquor last time, too gone now to complain about the lack of it today.

Gratitude does not exist for long in this place, it gets stamped out, chokes on smoke.

This time, Will takes to the pipe with hunger, relaxes back into the couch with soft groan of absolute and unfeigned pleasure. He’s dressed similarly today, clothing just as expensive, bearing just as youthful and innocent, the picture of the perfect bait, tempting debauchery and aching for a lesson in reality.

Hannibal feels the smoke invade his own blood and settle his limbs, resting, this time, with his head on the opposite arm of the couch Will shares with him, lying as though extensions of the other, one long body flowing to the next.

“You will lose here, as you do at any table,” Hannibal warns him, but the words are soft, lips tilted in a smile that is only partially his own. “An entire inheritance,” he makes a soft sound with his lips and bites the pipe to speak around it. “Up in smoke.”

Will’s fingers slip beneath his stiff, high collar and tug it looser from against his throat upon a slow exhale. They linger on the silk puff tie - glossy black and expensive even in appearance - playing against the soft material, as his eyes linger on Hannibal.

“Better lost to this than to you,” he responds with a mild snort. He releases his collar and lets the pipe rest on the table, hand against his cheek, propped on his elbow to watch Hannibal down the length of the couch, the length of their bodies. “At least this holds the promise of pleasure, rather than the guarantee of embarrassment.”

His smile lasts, a moment, several, longer than he intends it to, but it’s part of the act, surely, the spoiled youth charmed by the novelty of such ideas as poverty and inebriation, and not Will’s own feelings.

Surely.

The pipe has scarcely cooled before he lifts it again, held long over the lamp, billows of resinous vapor drawn thick into his lungs, held until he's dizzy with it, and sighed slowly out towards Hannibal.

There is a moment of din, a new group of people arriving already drunk from other niches in the neighborhood, when Will meets Hannibal's eyes, both drifting but finding each other for that moment. He flicks a glance upwards, towards the floorboards conspicuously silent above them, brow lifting, the barest expression that releases as soon as he asks his silent question.

Hannibal hums, directs his eyes to the newcomers, gestures with the hand between them in a soft motion side to side. No.

He wonders what luck has allowed them to enjoy the night without Mason's presence, what business had called him away. He wonders if he has yet to sleep, if his paranoia has driven him, as it had multiple times, to another part of the city, seeking pleasures and comforts among the more expensive escorts. Some he bought outright, to not worry about the damage done to them.

He shivers, remembering the conversation, the way he had thought of Will in just the same way. A boy to be used, abused, made moan and discarded. A wind up toy, just to see how he would go, with powders and liquids and smoke driving his beautiful eyes skyward and back into his head.

Hannibal arches, a slow motion, and slips further down the couch before reaching for the pipe on the table, his own or Will's it no longer matters, to take a long, deep breath.

"The pipe holds many promises," he responds, finally, as though the silent conversation between them had not occurred, and it may not have, Hannibal can't be sure. He directs his own eyes up again, hums his pleasure and lets them close. "Chasing their fulfilment is like trying to hold onto sand."

There is no disappointment when Hannibal answers him, as silently as he asked, merely that same warm contentment, fulfilled profoundly even by what's been accomplished so far tonight. Solidifying themselves here, though Hannibal is already at home upon the couch, but as friends, as acquaintances, a strengthening of the edifice they're constructing together.

In truth, with the taste of flowers on his tongue, Will could have felt similarly achieved in simply putting on a pair of wool socks, and the thought draws a sudden grin. He presses the back of his hand to his cheek, cool against the flush grown ruddy there, and hums a little as the laugh eases away.

"But," Will responds, "is that not true of all promises, even those made in good faith? Of all desires, even? There is no certainty of fulfillment for anything, nothing to guarantee even that which one might with all their heart guarantee."

He shifts, his legs beside Hannibal's along the couch, an unintentional brush that sets off sensations blooming bright up the length of his body.

"Hell," he breathes, and eases ahead just as readily, his words like the plumes of smoke that brighten his eyes. "So is it not better, then, to seek pleasure where one knows it might be found, rather than linger in anticipation for that not assured?"

Hannibal hums again, the sound slipping to a lower timbre, deep in his chest like the purr of a cat. Someone brushes his arm with their thigh as they walk past, further, deeper into the den as it fills with people and noise and smoke.

No one will look twice at two men sharing the couch when four or five at once pile upon it, and will, within the hour.

Hannibal allows a gentle shift, enough to feel Will's leg against his own again, feels the spark heat his skin, crawl tickling and welcome up his side, his arm, over his shoulder and leave his throat in a long exhale that tails in a laugh.

"Greedy boy," he murmurs, drops an arm heavy to rest across Will's ankles, up over his shins. A motion easily masked under the weight of the smoke. He lets his head loll to the side, eyes barely open to regard the pleasant flush against Will's cheeks.

"You have pleasure within you and you seek more of it," he clicks his tongue, invisible between the back of the couch and the way they lie, he curls his fingers just under Will's calf.

A deep breath is drawn to ease the shiver that spirals up the length of Will's spine. He eases the sharp intake into a languid, feline stretch, made heavy by the poppy, but for the small shift of his body, relaxing from the stretch, and leg extending a little further for Hannibal's hand to glide against. Only an inch or two, but enough that the light catches in his widened eyes, an alarm that's quickly relieved into an eminent satisfaction.

Will catches his thumb between his teeth, head resting on his folded arm now, curled just enough to see Hannibal, still, through the hypnotic twists of vapor winding between them.

"Hardly fair to lay the burden of libertinism on me when it has so entirely been by your encouragement," Will muses. His eyes darken a little, hooded by long lashes, the childish effervescence simmering lower now, warm as the embers that heat their pipes. "I was destined for a life of simple comforts, before you."

Another shift of leg, a soft sound when Hannibal's fingers press a little firmer against the wool of his trousers, inaudible in the din to any but Hannibal. Will swears that the embers are Hannibal himself, that he is made of them or kin to them, for the heat that passes through the thick material and burns against his skin.

"Should we limit our fulfillment, then, and restrain ourselves from seeking out more - call ourselves satisfied so readily? For what reason, for whom? The Church, the Queen?" He catches his lip between his teeth, fingers tangling in his long curls of hair to slide them back from his face and better see. Thumb against his teeth again, voice lowered. "Sod them," Will answers to himself, "I would know whatever pleasure you may show me."

Hannibal exhales until he feels as though his entire being is weightless and filled with nothing. Then he breathes in again.

Around them, the noise has somewhat quieted, some people murmuring as they are, others already far into their stupor and silent. Regardless, no one pays them mind, no one cares for their proximity, for the way their eyes settle and remain unblinking on the other, the rest a blur of motion and smoke and silence.

“I have shown you this,” he offers, knowing his own voice is weak in its conviction, knowing that what Will asks is *beyond* and *more* and so, so dangerous. Not here. Anywhere but here.

And while the drugs last, why fear it? When their bodies lift and their lungs fill and nothing will hurt and the night will go on for hours and hours and hours yet?

Hannibal’s eyes slip to Will again when the other laughs, a gentle vibration in his throat that tugs his lips wider around the thumb still between his teeth, that narrows his eyes. Hannibal’s breath leaves him without his permission, this time.

He does not need this, he cannot. His job was to get the boy in, to get him close, to keep him safe. He cannot afford the distraction, cannot afford the commitment, cannot threaten their cover this way, with the boy’s incredible eyes liquid on him, swimming in his mind as they had been some nights, as they had threatened to some days.

Someone leans to take Hannibal’s pipe and he lets them, fingers loosening before letting go entirely, letting his hand drop to the floor, his fingers circling over the soft carpet there as the fingers of his other hand begin to mirror, as he watches black ink its way to Will’s eyes, darken them, widen them...

“Get up,” he tells him softly.

Will hears the words in his chest, more expansive than even the smoke that made his ribs feel fit to cracking, and closes his eyes.

Foolish, foolhardy. An act to those around them, an effect of the poppy sinking heavy into his blood, but Will knows with a hollow sinking in his belly that if there were none to hear them, were there no vapors still wrapped throughout his limbs, they would have been entirely the same.

An unnecessary risk, for Hannibal so long ensconced here, for the job yet to be completed, for his own life yet to be lived, were even these few unchecked suggestions to fall on the wrong ears.

A breath drawn as though to speak, to laugh about youth corrupted and to take up the pipe again as though nothing were said at all, until Will feels a rough thumb stroke against his calf and finds himself standing without realizing he’s done so and his words falter when he meets Hannibal’s eyes again.

He doesn’t even know the man’s last name, or if the one he gave is his own.

It hardly matters.

Hazy, smoke-thick, Will draws himself into his coat, follows, leads, out into the street where he finally remembers to put his hat on his head. Confidence building with every step, fear its shadow, there but unseen except as they pass beneath lamps, a presence acknowledged but unheeded. For a moment, watching the trail of cigarette smoke part Hannibal's lips and wind coiling towards the gaslamp overhead, Will imagines he sees stars. Brilliant bright and unblackened yet by the city soot, he stops to watch, and laughs when he realizes that it's snowing.

He doesn't feel the cold, doesn't feel anything beyond the pins and needles as the little flakes fall against his exposed skin. He breathes and steam leaves his lips without the aid of a cigarette, and he wonders if he has become the smoke entirely, if it has filled him so deeply that he will breathe it forever.

The thought makes him laugh again, head back, carefree.

He only goes when he is pulled, stumbles over a cobblestone and pushes his hands into his pockets to keep them warm.

It isn't as late, now, as when they left the week before, though people pay them just as little attention. Going about their way hunched and wrapped against the snow. Will feels a pang of regret being the only one to appreciate it, white, still before it's corrupted by the filth of the ground, falling to its end there with no hope of safety.

He holds out his palm again, catches what few flakes he can, watches them melt. At least their end was met with warmth and comfort.

He shivers, and it isn't from the cold.

Will follows the path of Hannibal's cigarette as he flicks it from himself and to the ground. The ember fades, the smoke dissipating quickly.

And then it's up the stairs on quiet feet, and Will's smiling too much and warning that they should be quiet, that they need to be, as he works the key into the lock and turns it, allows Hannibal inside before himself and follows him in.

There is still snow clinging to Will's topper when he removes it, disappearing into the felt, and he hangs it on the wall. He shoves quick fingers through his hair and shivers at the sensation, turning to lock the door.

He wonders, for a moment, why he would - who he seeks to keep out, and who he seeks to keep in. His shadow stretches longer in the dim light from the street below, larger than himself, thrown distorted and unclear against the wall, its presence unavoidable now, and Will frowns a little as his fingers find the buttons of his coat.

"Hannibal," he sighs, turning and rolling out of his coat. "I -"

His words - his breath, his heartbeat, his every thought - are dispersed beneath the weight of Hannibal's mouth against his own. Coat still caught around his shoulders, door against his back, Will's eyes roll closed and he exhales, hard, releasing any more words or worries that

would dare take shape in favor of pressing back, lips meeting fast, sliding smooth against each other. A little sound, startled from deep inside him, makes its way from between their mouths, and Hannibal's arm pulls around Will's waist to keep him from simply sliding to the floor.

It matters not, what might have been said or what may yet need to be. It matters not, the consequences, the danger, the risks of it all. It matters only that they are here, now, with their own truth between them, and no one else.

“Yes,” sighed, with the only breath Hannibal has within his lungs before he presses Will to the door again, the lack of air burning him, heating him, bringing him entirely to life as he frames Will's face with one hand and moves his lips to feel Will's part beneath them.

Soft, pliant, beautiful boy, and Hannibal wonders if Will has ever felt this before, if he has ever had his mouth pried open by another's, has had his body pressed so close to another heartbeat that he loses himself.

Hands come up to grip his coat, smaller hands than his own, colder, and they tug, insistent and surprisingly strong, and Hannibal relents, pressing his forehead to Will's as his hands twist, shove the coat off and away to the floor where it won't matter anymore. The breath between them is sweet and intoxicating as the smoke had been, as though they are both mere embers burning with it from within.

He waits, waits for those eyes to open again, seek upwards to catch Hannibal's own, and only then allows his lips to tilt in a smile, from gentle to playful to predatory before the start of Will's gentle whimper is swallowed by him whole.

Disheveled, flushed, coat scarcely hanging from his shoulders, Will sighs, shaking, and moans into the kiss. Gentle urgency in the clumsy movement of his mouth, following the slow press, spread, parting of Hannibal's lips, and Will's hand finds its way to Hannibal's hair, the soft strands caught between his fingers.

He's grateful for the door, certain he would fall dizzy without it, splaying his fingers against the wood to support him to bring his body back to itself, gone now like ashes, like snow, caught in the warm destruction of Hannibal's heat that consumes him entirely.

A peck here, a brush of fingers, a farmer's daughter and the cousin of an acquaintance. Little more than that and even less interest in the pursuit of it, unmoved by any until now. A week spent wondering, and disallowing himself to wonder. A week with thoughts wandering towards the same end, and steered back by the knowledge of where that indulgence would bring him, would bring them both.

A week spent imagining, late at night in the safety of darkness, and even that but embers beside the immolation of Hannibal's body pressed fast against his own.

Only when their lungs are singed from lack of breath does Will lower his hand, fingers pressed trembling to Hannibal's cheek, again to his jaw, lashes falling heavy-lidded across his eyes as he traces the line of Hannibal's neck, and finally presses to his chest, where his heart is so near that Will imagines he could but curl his fingers and hold it in his hand.

He laughs, softly, breathless and overcome. "I don't," he sighs, swallowing hard, cheeks scarlet, "I don't know what to do."

"Take the pleasure I show you," comes the reply, breathless and warm, voice so low Will feels it against his fingers rather than hears it. To him it sounds like thunder, loud and all-encompassing and heavy yet he knows that Hannibal had not spoken above a whisper.

He feels his own heart beat his body to willing submission.

Dark eyes meet his long enough for Will to see them filled with pupil and almost red in the bare lights of the streetlamps outside. Then Hannibal ducks his head, turns it to draw damp lips over Will's neck and Will shivers, entirely overcome with the sensation, lips parted and moan pulled long.

Strong fingers fold over his lips, hold the sounds in as Will makes another, and another, from nothing more than contact between them, skin to skin. Hannibal laughs, curses, murmurs something in a language Will has never heard, and slides a hand up to slip his collar wider, mindful of the buttons, enough to reveal the gentle bend of shoulder and neck before his teeth find it instead.

"Hell," Will groans, the sound muffled by a firmer press of Hannibal's fingers across his lips. He kisses them, touches his tongue to them, tastes the resin and tobacco and work that's roughened his skin, tries to memorize it but finds it lost in the flurry of snow, of stars, that falls behind his eyes when Hannibal's tongue traces the pale red marks his teeth laid before.

Quick movements to shrug out of his coat, letting it finally fall to the ground, in his shirttails now, and as it falls Will remembers there is more to his body than where Hannibal has touched him, and certainly more to Hannibal's body.

You have pleasure within you and you seek more of it.

Seek and want and ache and need like Will's felt for little else in his life, beyond life itself when it was imperiled, as precarious a sensation as the precipice on which he has now found himself.

Better the fall you control than the one that surprises you.

He tugs Hannibal closer, hands wrapped in his shirt, working loose the buttons without the patience Hannibal shows, the eager fumbblings of inexperienced youth. Head tilting, cheek warm against Hannibal's own, he murmurs against his ear, hips rolling outside of his control, "Show me everything."

A soft groan from Hannibal now, a shiver through his body as Will has never seen before, a twist of his back that sets Hannibal's hands on either side of Will against the door as the other fumbles to undress him. His eyes closed, his lips parted, jaw working gently before he sighs out, allows his breathing to elevate, shallow, as his eyes rise slowly up to meet Will's again.

The folly of youth.

Folly, folly, folly.

Yet he still leans in to kiss again, to push Will back into stillness for just a moment more. Then those hands, smaller, colder than his own, splay over his chest and Hannibal nearly growls with the sensation.

He wants, he wants, he wants. He wants immediately and more, to pull Will close to him and devour every breath and sound and sensation from him. To feel him shiver against him, tremble when all reason leaves him.

Hands seek, slip around Will's back and lower, they don't linger, but strong fingers hook beneath the curve of his thighs and hoist, until Will gasps in surprise and presses closer for balance. One step, another, and Hannibal has him against the wall, now, sturdier than the wooden structure already rattling on old hinges.

Another roll of hips to match Will's, another baring of teeth in promise, and Hannibal straightens, one hand up quick to catch Will's lips again, bend them out of shape as he silences him, as their hips rub together and Will's eyes roll back again in ecstasy. And this, Hannibal just watches.

"Hannibal," Will sighs from beneath his fingers, as though resinous fog were pouring from his lips, and again, moaned eagerly to simply feel the name upon his lips, beneath fingers that seek to smother it to necessary silence. He grins crooked, chasing Hannibal's fingertips with kisses as his eyes open again, just barely. A heavy-lidded regard laid on Hannibal, hair tousled into his face, clothes rumpled in disrepair.

His flushed lips unfurl on a low groan and he twists himself, a lithe, sinuous motion, arrhythmic with eagerness to feel that friction again. An awkward shifting against the hands and body that hold Will weightless, against the opium that makes him feel heavy even still, until he feels them press together, there, *there*, and he bites his lip to stifle the shudder that manifests into an eager whimper.

Fingers curl against Hannibal's chest, all so unfamiliar, the startling heat of another body so close to his own, of a body like this, so often imagined in illicit allowances late, late at night, and never realized. Until this, until now, until Hannibal, and Will will know every inch of him, fingernails scraping against his chest as he drags his hand across it.

The other finds his cheek, palm soft against the unshaven stubble, to trace the line of his jaw, follow his lips and force his own to part when Hannibal draws Will's finger into his mouth. His eyes widen, hips rocking faster, ceaseless now as Hannibal's cheeks hollow, as he feels Hannibal's tongue roll against the length of his finger.

"I'm - stop, I'll - " gasps Will, choking on the words.

A bite, just gentle, against the fingers between his teeth and Hannibal does not heed the warning, the plea to stop that voices anything but. He brings a hand back to tug Will's hair, to tilt his head and bare his throat as he rubs harder against him, forces that pleasure to seep hot through his blood, coil in his belly, send trembling to his limbs.

He needs not contain Will's sounds now, soft whimpering things that they are, as he presses closer, rolls his hips and settles cheek to cheek with the other to feel him shudder through his release, knowing Will's eyes will be wide open, seeking on the ceiling for a meaning or an answer and finding only the fuzzy tendrils on the edges of his vision threatening to take him under.

The drug hot under his skin.

"Oh."

It's so gentle, so warm, and so utterly pure that Hannibal's breath catches in his chest, stings his lungs, parts his lips on silence and the genuine shock of what they had just done, what he had allowed himself to do when he told himself, made himself, convinced himself to avoid.

Soft hands seek across his face, to bring him closer, to kiss, to touch, to feel him out after all this, a grounding, and Hannibal wants to flee, to drag Will with him out of this city, to see him in a boat and long gone, assignment be damned.

"Will," he sighs, licks his lips, tilts his head when the touches grow demanding, permits the kisses peppered to his lips before pulling further back, slipping hands along Will's thighs to set his feet on the ground again.

The ground feels so unyielding beneath him, his body so heavy when before, he had been weightless, in every way. Still dizzy, still breathless from it, a lifetime wanting and never having, a week of imagining and resisting and imagining even still and he won't take his hands from Hannibal's face. He won't stop his thumb from following his mouth, won't stop his mouth from seeking Hannibal's again, softer, desperate.

Fearful.

"Please."

The drug burned away between them, all the assurances it provided now cold as ashes, and the weight of what they've done forces breath back into his lungs, forces Will to steady when all he wants is for Hannibal to kiss him again, to pick him up and press away the worry between them, and his hands are shaking and he won't lower them, sliding them around Hannibal's neck instead to draw against him.

"Please," he whispers, "don't. Don't say it."

He doesn't know what he imagined now. What he thought would happen, what he hoped might.

Folly.

Foolishness.

"I'm sorry."

Will's arms lower and fold, still unsteady enough on his feet that he lets himself lean against the wall behind him, lips drawn between his teeth, and eyes on their coats, discarded, older than he should be. Older than he is.

Hannibal sighs, eyes closed and head ducked, and rests one hand against the wall by Will's head, folds it gently to rest his elbow there instead, closer now, as his other curls fingers under Will's chin and lifts it.

"Breathe, Will," he murmurs, leans closer to rub his nose just gently against Will's until the other obliges and shudders out a breath.

He breathes steadily himself, as much as he can, to have Will mirror, before he tilts his head and kisses him again, a soft tender thing, very much unlike the kisses they had just shared. He lingers.

"These pleasures are dangerous," he whispers, "but they are not unwelcome."

A swallow, a click in his throat as he sighs again, shakes his head and ducks it to press to Will's shoulder, feeling the younger man tremble still, but body tense now, not languid, not open and welcoming and free as it had been and Hannibal aches for him that way again.

"Be careful where you ask me for them," Hannibal continues, words coming quick now, "Be careful who will hear."

Another kiss, a little deeper, until Will makes a soft sound against him and Hannibal pulls back.

"Consider the assignment, consider the time we have, it's precious little." He leans back enough to look, to see Will properly. His thumb strokes soft against Will's throat, against his fluttering pulse, the only reassurance he can give him.

Will watches him from beneath his hair, a penetrating gaze, searching, and his insult is tempered by whatever he has found when he turns his eyes away again.

"I have not forgotten," he murmurs, jaw set even as - almost against his own desires - he tilts his head towards Hannibal's hand to rest his cheek in it.

A moment more, taken now, when no more are guaranteed.

"I need to meet him. Soon," Will finally says, lifting his head, resting it back against the wall to watch Hannibal. "I know you would rather avoid it, I could readily see it in your face tonight, but I've no choice in the matter. The letter hadn't come directly to me, but was routed through friends in the department, seeking uncorrupted conduits."

He swallows hard, as Hannibal's hand lowers, and steps past him.

"I've no choice, and if you are capable of arranging it without intoxication first, it would be better for us all."

The color, the luminous flush of red, has faded from him now in mere minutes, once again the strange, distant man with whom Hannibal first played cards. No boy in his body language now, that part of him hidden away, no doubt still trembling soft flutters inside his chest. He adjusts the sleeves of his shirt, slowly tidying himself, his back towards Hannibal, and wonders what, in truth, he had ever imagined his first such experience would be.

At this, Will allows a wan smile.

"When should I plan to meet you?"

Hannibal gives him the space, gives him the chance to put himself together, his own hands working the buttons back on his own shirt, though he leaves it untucked. He can still feel the scratches on his chest where the fabric rests against them.

"Tomorrow at the inn," he tells him, watching Will a moment more before reaching out to set his palm warm against Will's back, holding there until the tension passes and he can slide it to his neck, stepping closer.

"After that we will go again," he assures him, head tilted to see Will's eyes, to feel the scrutiny from them, to see beneath the solid shell of grounding, the soft need beneath. "And you can meet him."

A sigh, unheard, as Hannibal finds him again across that small space, and he feels something unwind a little inside of him. Some small hope that perhaps if Hannibal will come to him across that space, perhaps he will come to him again.

Smoke, he tells himself, his thoughts are smoke, but he does not resist the touch, does not turn away again when Hannibal steps in front of him.

Their eyes meet, and Will lifts a hand to rest against Hannibal's wrist, where the older man has curled his fingers gently around the back of his neck. Will strokes his thumb against the soft skin laid across his tendons, across his pulse, and he watches Hannibal as he turns his mouth against it, kissing softly.

Testing unfamiliar ground, resisting the eager, idiot thrum of his heart at the movement.

"Tomorrow, then. Why the inn?"

"Because you have games to lose to me, at the inn," Hannibal reminds him softly, a smile just tilting his lips at the feeling of Will's against his wrist. "And he will check. Because youth must show its impatience in seeking the drug, and because you are not yet welcome to the den alone."

A moment more and Will nods, and Hannibal squeezes gently against the warm skin and bends to gather his coat from the floor.

He swings it over his shoulders, works the buttons quickly done, and feels less warmth than he had with Will pressed so tight against him, so needy, trembling, curious.

A pause, a lingering doubt, and then Hannibal swallows it, leans in to brush his lips warm over Will's cheek, just under his eye. And then he's gone, careful with the lock, gracious in the quiet closing of the door behind him.

He lifts his collar as he takes the stairs, considers.

He considers what awaits them, considers what it means that he still tastes Will against his lips.

He wonders if he will be able to keep Mason from Will a little longer. If he can keep the boy believing his employer was honest in intent.

He wonders if he had ever anticipated this.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“I wonder if a loyal dog should see a new pup broken in,” Mason sighs, slips his hand higher to adjust the lapels of Hannibal’s coat. The other endures. “Or if it should do the breaking.”

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: physical abuse, sexual abuse, Mason being absolutely awful

Will wins three hands, loses two, downs two fingers of whiskey, and kisses Hannibal four times before they leave the inn.

More intoxicated by the feel of Hannibal’s mouth against his own than he is by the whiskey which merely serves to stabilize, Will’s nerves are prickled sharp all the way up his spine. A sparing glance at the man who walks just in front of him, cigarette balanced between his lips, and Will averts his eyes again. He wonders where Hannibal went last night. If he came back here, if he went home, if he went to bed - if he thought of Will anywhere near how much Will thought of him, with an aching fondness and a feeling in his chest like something splitting in two.

The snow has come and mostly gone, leaving blackened slush beneath their feet, soaking cold into the toes of their shoes. Will watches the pooling of ice around his feet, forcing the shadows of doubt from his eyes. When he lowers his hand from his mouth, he is grinning, broadly, no longer the gentle, sweet thing that Hannibal saw the night before.

“It may be simpler, at this rate, to simply buy you the bottle straight away,” Will observes brightly as they turn the corner towards the den. He skips back off the cobbles as a carriage clatters loudly past, and observes as the pigeons circle a moment more, and then drop fluttering back to a pile of something unfathomable in the gutter.

Wide-eyed, naive, and young - enough elements of himself to give truth to the falsities.

“No brandy this time, unless you’d strongly prefer it,” he adds, nose wrinkling. “Too heavy, especially considering -”

“Considering your sensitive country constitution,” comes a voice so boisterous that it startles Will into a stumble from walking backwards to face Hannibal as they went. He recovers

quickly enough, eyes wide as he rights himself with a quick push of fingertips off the ground, and comes face to face with the proprietor. Arms folded against the cold, smoking jacket still remarkably white, he regards Will with an easy smile. "And here I thought you farm boys were made of tougher stuff than that."

Will doesn't look to Hannibal as he wishes to, and instead simply turns a similarly relaxed expression back on Mason, but it falters. He can't capture it just right, something in the eyes that won't let him, so he simply widens his smile instead.

"Tough enough, I assure you," Will grins, and offers his gloved hand. "William Ward. I apologize for not making your acquaintance when we met previously, but I was rather indisposed."

"Did you like it?" Mason asks, smile just as wide, brows up in a way that almost seems to mock genuine curiosity. He is like a pantomime of human expression, Will can't read him because he isn't sure he's looking at a person. He blinks, instead, tilts his head. Mason laughs.

"You did, look at you. Look at him." A slight adjustment, a carrying of his tone past Will and to the man behind him. There is a quiet hiss as Hannibal tosses his cigarette to the curb. He sighs, it seems to be answer enough.

"And you came last night. Already back for more like a well-trained pup." Finally, Mason clasps Will's hand as he's about to pull it away. "And you will keep being good, won't you. Raised a gentleman, remains a gentleman."

Blue eyes meet Will's over the thin rims of Mason's glasses and Will swallows, blinks, lips parting and yet with nothing to say. The man seems to find this delightful.

"I, too, was raised a gentleman," he tells Will, squeezing his hand a little harder. "Taught to always be polite. To offer anything in my house to those that enter it. Momma raised Mason to be a good boy, as yours raised you." A grin then, quick, and he drops Will's hand, turns to gesture them both inside before him.

Hannibal he stops with a palm against his chest, a touch almost frighteningly intimate.

"I wonder if a loyal dog should see a new pup broken in," Mason sighs, slips his hand higher to adjust the lapels of Hannibal's coat. The other endures. "Or if it should do the breaking."

"What do you *want*, Mason?" he asks, voice, smooth, almost entirely toneless. "A loyal dog does what it's told."

Will steps inside first, taking the cue, their voices drowned by the din within. The snow has sent the lotus-eaters seeking warmth, comfort, a sweeter way to spend their wages than on a crowded lodging house floor - better an hour on the pipe, to carry them through the night.

"Don't let him touch the stuff yet," Mason decides, fingers stroking down Hannibal's chest as he lowers his hand again. The older man resists a shudder, that unwelcome touch pressed

where Will clung to him the night before, and again, when Mason adds with a crooked grin, "I want him to be awake for this."

He turns in a slow roll from where he had leaned against the doorway, tugging his jacket dramatically tighter against the cold, and Hannibal follows obedient, head lowered but to catch Will's eyes for an instant, enough conveyed in that for Will to know that he should not settle on the couches yet.

"Tell me," Mason chirps, striding towards Will, even his steps exaggerated, languid. "What does your father do?"

An eager smile is turned towards him as Will shoulders out of his coat, and allows it to be absconded with by a quick-handed boy who appears at his side to take it, gone just as quickly.

"Ships," Will responds, as though particularly excited to discuss it. "He owns a shipyard, in Hull, and many ships within it. Whaling, predominantly, but there's booming new business in -"

"Fascinating," sighs Mason, hands clasping together with a clap. "Just fascinating." He reaches, takes Will's hands in his own, and turns them over to study his palms. "And you - never had a day's labor, have you?"

He strokes his thumbs along Will's uncalloused fingers and Will draws them away, cheeks flushed. "Some of us are luckier than others," he responds, watching as Mason's grin widens, and finally splits into a laugh.

"Isn't that the truth? Some of us have plenty, others none, isn't that just the way of things?" He turns towards Hannibal, briefly, with a perverse pleasure before slinging his arm across Will's shoulders. "But the thing about luck, Will - I can call you Will? Great. The thing about luck, Will, is that it's only what we make of it."

He ambles towards the stairs, Will beneath his arm.

"Like playing cards," Will agrees, blush darkening as Mason pats his other hand against Will's chest with a boisterous laugh.

"Exactly right. You can lose everything. You can win it all. But there's two parts that determine what path you take - the cards you're dealt, and how you play them. You've been dealt a good hand," Mason acknowledges, "but do you take a risk that could pay off, or play it safe?"

Will, head ducked to listen, blinks as he realizes Mason isn't going to answer his own question this time. He swallows, a hesitation, a resistance to turning back towards Hannibal and turning back towards the pipes instead, wanting. Finally, he forces a laugh.

"Hannibal can answer that well enough," he grins. "It isn't truly gambling if you're not willing to take the risk, is it?"

“That’s right, exactly right,” Mason nods, brows furrowed as though Will had said something utterly profound. It worries Will, more than he had anticipated, how little he can read Mason. He is a tornado of emotion, unstable and changeable.

“I need to borrow your imagination,” the first letter had said, “You have a particular way of looking at things, at people, that I would like to utilize. You are entirely unique.”

This is one of the first times Will has felt entirely helpless with his gift, it offers him no advantages, no clues, almost nothing at all.

“And you, you’re determined. You don’t stop at an obstacle. You don’t pull a knife and shank the bastard, you buy him a drink.” Another laugh, a hand up to catch Will’s chin as he turns to the den at large, seeking. Mason tuts.

“No, no don’t let your attention wander, Will, that would be rude.” He guides them to the foot of the stairs and here Will does turn back to Hannibal behind them, the man’s eyes down and stance a falsity of relaxation. It’s almost like a flood of warmth to be able to read *him*, to see the familiar changes and twists, despite the worry it brings with it.

“I wouldn’t want to impose -”

“Nonsense! I’m *inviting*. Such determination and persistence is a useful skill, Will, it will get you far. From the country to the city, from the slums to the castles. Take a *risk*, my sweet boy.”

Mason turns then, yells something in Turkish to the man behind the bar before guiding Will up the stairs ahead of him. Behind them, Hannibal stops to quietly adjust Mason’s request. He takes the older wine, stronger. If the lightness of drink could spare Will some of this struggle he would give him that.

Upstairs, Mason takes the bottle from Hannibal as Will surveys the room - half-residence, half-office - and looks from the label to Hannibal, past him back down the stairs in a moment of uncertain mistrust in his own memory before handing it off to Hannibal again.

"Open it, Hannibal. Young William and I have reason to celebrate," Mason beams, and Will forces his attention away from the window, back towards Mason across his shoulder.

"Do we?" he answers, bemused.

Mason meets his grin with one of his own, that falls away suddenly to watch Hannibal carry the bottle to the small sideboard. "We will."

Will's fingers press against the sill as he leans to watch the street below. A carriage rackets slowly past, churning up the grey slush of former snow beneath it, and chimneys peak into the grey sky, spires of black in countless number.

I believed I could fly. Hannibal had said, I was encouraged to.

"Quite a view," Will adds softly, to which Mason snorts a laugh.

"Ah," he resolves himself, stroking a finger beneath his eye, "it is. It is quite. Hannibal loves it. His favorite place to stand sullen and sulking." There's affection, of some sort, perhaps, in his taunting words, a fondness as one might imagine it, had they never encountered the thing itself. "He's a good sport, though, isn't he," Mason sighs, pleased as Hannibal brings each a glass.

"I've found him to be," agrees Will, accepting the glass from Hannibal, fingers passing against each other. Will is grateful for it, eyes glancing towards Hannibal's before he takes a small sip, turning back towards Mason and find his way back to drape into a chair. "Pray, then, what are we celebrating?"

Mason sits on the edge of the table, toes pressed against the carpet, knees close enough to brush Will's if he leaned in any closer to him. "I trust Hannibal. I trust him immensely, and have found him to be an excellent judge of character, despite his predilections. And so someone Hannibal trusts, is by proxy, someone that I can trust. Do you follow, Will?"

His lips twitch, curve into a faint smile, amused. "I follow so far, unsure of where yet you lead me."

A shiver, visible, sparks down Mason's spine and he laughs, once. "Clever boy. Where I lead you is for me to know - I am the dealer for this game. I know the cards. I know what you have, I know what remains in the pot, and I know what you need to get it."

"An offer, then, to get you ahead in the game," Mason grins, sliding from the desk and leaning forward, to support himself, hands on the arms of Will's chair. "I make you a partial partner, like good ol' Hannibal here. You spend some of daddy's money, the way you were going to anyway, and you can come in here whenever you like, any pipe, any bottle, yours for the taking."

Will's eyes widen, as though entirely surprised by this offer, and he takes a lengthier sip of wine, sucking his lower lip into his mouth in thought. "And is there interest on this return? An investment worth considering if only for the benefits so described, and a gambler I may be, but beyond the inheritance itself, I've also inherited a reasonable business sense." His smile curves wider and he tosses his hair back from his face, leaning back beneath Mason who lingers over him.

A brief twitch, just the lower lids of Mason's eyes, before he laughs again. And the sound is too loud, too close, and Will swallows, keeps his own smile in place. He doesn't look at Hannibal.

The other just leans, at the window where Will had passed him, arms crossed in front of him, legs crossed at the ankle, watching Mason with unfocused eyes. He does not know what Will is meant to do. He doesn't know if his assignment involved a physical action or merely intel, he doesn't know if Will is going to leave here with the information he needs and never come back. He doesn't know if Will is going to leave here without aid.

"What will you invest, dear boy, when you gamble it all away? When Hannibal here takes all your money in some dingy inn your kind usually wouldn't set foot into, hmm?"

Will just blinks, parts his lips to speak, leans back on reflex when Mason leans in closer to continue.

"I am offering you security here, Will. Partnership in a business. A constant flow and ebb of money, that I control, of course, but that is entirely, decidedly, legally yours."

"Aside from what you owe," Hannibal adds, soft enough to just hear.

"Aside from what I owe," Will agrees softly, without turning towards Hannibal, without allowing the gentle shiver that seeks to trickle down his spine.

He tilts his head, just so, a slight inclination of his chin, eyes bright as they meet Mason's.

"A security, then, in money held and services rendered, mine to withdraw again when I see fit," Will intones, softly. "But you spoke of risk, and thus far I hear none, which begs the question - in what, or whom, is the risk on which to gamble?"

Mason's smile widens, glasses glinting in the gaslights.

"Me," he declares softly. "I'm the risk."

Will swallows, and it's pause enough for Mason to laugh again, exuberant.

"I kid, I kid," he grins, leaning back, standing and stretching, to ease the distance between them. "You've met me, know him, have sampled the goods, haven't you? Enough to know they're unadulterated."

Will draws a breath, in the space released between them, and sighs, pleased. "How much?"

Mason turns back towards him, tilting his head one way, and then the other, in thought.

"Whatever you feel confident enough to give," he shrugs, pulling his coat tighter, arms folded.

Drawing his lower lip between his teeth in thought, Will grins, coy.

"Ten," he offers, shifting in his seat. "Thousand. To begin the relationship in good faith, of course, and more to follow should it be beneficial to us both."

An unfathomable amount in this place, where children starve in the streets as readily as the dogs, where women sell themselves for pittance, and workers earn scarce enough to put leaking roofs above their head.

Hannibal's eyes narrow, another murmur parting past the cigarette now smoking between his lips, "A boon, Mason. Would the boy pay me back so readily."

A hum, considering, before Mason turns to Hannibal and merely regards him, there, by the window. He remembers the keenness of the man when he'd met him, the excitability. He remembers the first spark of addiction, the way the man would do anything for the pipe, for powder and drink. He remembers how harsh the laugh in his throat had felt when Hannibal had 'flown', determined to please.

He remembers the aftermath, the grooming, and shivers pleasantly before tilting his head at Will once more with a click of his tongue.

"Now that is a problem we must immediately address," he says, shaking his head as though speaking to a delinquent child. With a frown of displeasure, Mason takes a deep breath, turns on his heel to walk away from the desk, from Will. Hannibal watches the tension leave the younger man. Does not allow himself to look anywhere but the man in white meandering around the room, though he sees the brief little look Will sends him, needing reassurance.

He ashes his cigarette with the flick of his thumb against the filter.

"In truth, none of the money you owe Hannibal is Hannibal's either, it's mine." A laugh, lilting, amused. "I let him off the leash once in a while for good behaviour and he finds me boys like you. Boys that have the best intentions and upbringing and... reasonable business sense." A smile then, before Mason moves to lean over the desk, the barrier between him and Will in place but he holds the younger man in his thrall regardless, like a cobra hypnotizing a mouse.

"I cannot have an investor in debt to anyone. Not even my best dog. And especially not to me. It leads to such difficulties. And a business partnership cannot start with those." A tapping of fingertips to wood before Mason licks his lips.

"Do you know why you're here, Will? Beyond your investment, beyond your business sense. You're here because of him." A nod towards Hannibal. The other parts his lips to release a coil of smoke and sighs, dissipating it. "Because he trusted to bring you here, despite your debt and despite your youth. And I trust him. A hard-earned thing with me, dear Will, very hard earned, and yet another thing that simply must be present if we are to do business."

He sighs. "Trust."

Will feels the snap of tension in the air, electricity rising along the hair of his arm, the back of his neck, before the lightning strikes.

He means me harm.

Yes.

Nothing in him falters, an effortless smile, and a baring of his neck towards Mason as Will turns to regard Hannibal. It is nothing of the beautifully loose youthfulness of the night before, but a controlled and calculated movement that would deceive any but the man who had seen it so recently unbridled in innocence.

"A debt to be paid, then," Will agrees softly, turning back towards Mason and shifting forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "It is a gentleman's debt in truth, made for pleasure rather than necessity. I am free to play and he, free to not pay for his drinks for another night. Easily added to the amount of the investment," adds Will with a slight smile. "I trust him to know how much is owed."

Mason's fingers tap in quick succession across the desk and he purses his lips, eyes rolling skyward in thought. "Easily, but not most pleasingly," he sighs, clucking his tongue, and just as quickly grazing it across the front of his teeth. "Do you want to know why he chooses boys like you, rather than women of accord - elderly socialites, daughters of the rich, the usual mess?" He turns his hand through the air until, suddenly, his fingers clench, and his fist is brought down gently against the desk.

"Because he prefers them," Mason sighs, "pervert that he is, he loves the company - not even men, boys. Young ones, beautiful ones. You know the type, fresh off the boat - so to speak. Stars in their eyes."

An uncomfortable shift, as Will skims a finger beneath his collar to loosen it, stretching his neck. An affectation of surprise, of discomfort, shining bright in the blush that blooms across the bridge of his nose and spreads beneath his eyes.

"An illegal practice," whispers Will softly. "Years in the gaol, should you find yourself in the company of a kinder court. Death, should you not."

Mason shifts his shoulders, one way and then the other, shoving back from the desk to let his arms swing at his sides. "You English and your laws," he groans towards the ceiling. "Prim and proper all the way to the gallows. Who's talking?" he asks, turning his eyes back to Will. "No one here, certainly. Because we trust each other; dear Will. It's a poor man's crime at best, and you aren't that at all, are you?"

Will's lungs have scarcely filled with an intake of air before Mason swings an arm across his desk, sweeping aside the paperwork and pens and artifacts in a flurry, sending them fluttering to the floor.

"Hannibal," he snaps. "Over the desk."

It's almost too quick considering the distance, but Hannibal is there again, close, but far from a comfort. The smell of smoke, of the whiskey they had shared, something other, something entirely Hannibal now beneath the smell of all that and old snow.

One hand to the back of Will's neck, the other out to catch an arm he'd thrown out to catch himself over the hard surface of the desk with a whine. Hannibal twists him, holds him still with the heel of his palm pressing the top of his spine down, fingers tugging his hair to lift his face so Mason can see it. His other hand presses Will's wrist to the center of his back.

And then a touch, gentle, entirely hidden, a thumb against Will's pulse, a stroke of kindness as he had touched Will the night before. Just once.

Will makes a soft sound of displeasure, discomfort, and blinks, eyes up.

"You see he's worked for me a while," Mason continues. "I know what he likes, he knows what I like, and everyone is happier for it. And best of all, he is loyal to a fault."

Mason purses his lips, curls them into his mouth a moment and flicks his eyes up again as his hands thread together and twist for want of motion.

"I could tell him to pin you down, hold you there and slowly pull your arm higher and higher until it no longer lies as it's supposed to. And he will do it. And your sweet little words won't stop him." He bends to be closer to Will, voice lowering as though in a conspiratorial whisper, "It might encourage him. He's a fiend, our Hannibal."

"So I see," breathes Will, the sigh of his words forming grey vapor against the desk that fades just as soon as it appears.

He thinks of the snow that died warm and safe in his palm the night before, and closes his eyes.

"No," comes the snap of Mason's voice. Rough fingers find Will's face, driving into his cheeks, and Will gasps, blinking wide, his eyes searching out Mason's above him. "You'll want to stay awake for this. I can't have any doubts, any suspicions that you might not entirely understand. Trust, Will," he grins again, releasing Will's face with a rough shake.

Trust that I am with you.

Will shudders, twists against the desk to try to ease the tension in his shoulder, and finds no purchase. "I understand," he insists gently. "There's no need for - ah," Will breathes as he tries to move again and finds his arm burning hot beneath the pressure.

"Please. Mason," he swallows hard, and fights down the suggestion of a smile that threatens to play across his lips. "Hannibal."

"You know, I don't think I will ever grow tired of hearing that," Mason replies, his smile wide and almost manic now, "The way you say his name. It's so natural to you, like you've said it all your life. Has he corrupted you already?" His eyes flick up to Hannibal's. Hannibal just watches him, slowly raises an eyebrow and it seems enough for Mason to laugh again, let his eyes return to Will.

"I could never quite get him to bend," Hannibal responds at length, "to corrupt him with more than liquor and cards."

"Delightful!" Mason claps his hands, bends to watch Will closely as the younger man struggles again, tries to duck his head with a wince as the fingers in his hair tighten to prevent it. "Perfect. You know, he is so good. So good. I can send him away for weeks at a time and he always comes back to me. Sometimes with a toy, sometimes seeking one from me."

A sigh, almost fond. "And you know why, Will?"

"Because you trust him to?" comes the whispered response. Mason nods, an expression almost sage, as though divulging wisdom to Will that no one else knows, that it is his privilege to do so.

"Because I trust that he will listen, to everything I tell him to do," he confides. "I could tell him right now to sodomise you. Hold you down and take what you owe him from your tears and your cries, until he is satisfied. I could tell him, also, to strike you for every sound you

make. I wonder which would end first, your desire to seek help with your voice or your consciousness?"

A pause, then, Will's eyes wide, bright blue and genuinely scared. No more soft touches against his wrist, now, no more soothing words, none of the heat, the softness, the gentleness of the night before, and yet Will finds himself more inclined to arch back into Hannibal than be forced to face Mason.

A very soft laugh at that, bottom lip between Mason's teeth before he blinks, turns his head, glances up.

"Hannibal?" he gestures, permission.

Will doesn't have time to stop the sound that escapes him when Hannibal's hand loosens from his hair to jerk his trousers down past his hips. Eyes wide, he only just stops himself from asking Mason again for help, heart beating so hard against his ribs that he wonders if the vibrations can be felt through the desk or if it's merely his own body, trembling outside of his control.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

A test.

It was never supposed to be this way.

The blow catches him to the side of the face and he chokes back another sound, more than trembling now, shaking. Warm fingers - rough, already familiar - find their way to his skin, to work his drawers lower in a steady pull.

"A romantic," Mason practically sings, dropping back into his seat to watch, his eyes meeting Will's, wide and dark and desperate. "Taking his time with you, dear Will. You see? A good dog knows what its master wants, and I want to see your debts released."

"I will release them," Will breathes suddenly, feeling the winter air chill against his bare skin as it's exposed, across the curve of his backside, down to the join of his thighs. "Please, I'll do whatever you need, just don't -"

The next strike sends his ear ringing and brings tears welling fast in Will's eyes.

"Hannibal -"

Another.

"Pl-"

Another palm, hard across his cheek, and it's enough to silence Will into a shudder. Mason's laughter, an ecstatic clap of hands fills the space instead.

"Fantastic!"

Swallowing back his words, Will lifts an arm to tuck beneath his head, to press his forehead against as he is bared, fully, his garments held fast across his thighs. A silent sob wracks him, curls his spine not in the arching feline pleasure that Hannibal saw loosen his limbs before, but a desperate defense, terror tightening throughout. All Will's worries made manifest - those that stayed his hands and heart from seeking for the whole of his life - now shown to him in stark contrast to how he had hoped, perhaps, some day, maybe.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Hannibal's hands seek, slide over exposed skin, pressing fingerprints into it where Mason can see, gentling where he can't. He can feel every vibration of fear through Will's tense form, can see the sweat prickle in a sheen over his back where his shirt has been pushed up. He feels his heart tug and twist with every cruel motion.

But Will no longer speaks, no longer cries out, and he can spare him that pain at least, for now.

"How much does he owe me?" Mason asks, a tone light as though inquiring after the weather. Hannibal hums.

"A few pounds short of two thousand."

Mason whistles, rests a fist on the desk and his chin on top. He makes a sound of displeasure, brows furrowing, and reaches to slap Will gently with his free hand.

"Not good, Will, not good at all." He shakes his head, delights in seeing the tears just under Will's eyes before he manages to duck his head away.

"How much should I make his tears worth? They come so easily, perhaps they aren't worth a lot." He moves to stand as Hannibal yanks Will back against him hard, the shift arching Will's back and pulling another surprised whimper from him. It's met with a harsh strike to his thigh and Will almost vibrates with fear.

Mason makes a sound that seems almost ultimately pleased.

"Would be such a shame to waste them. Perhaps I'll freeze them. Use them for ice in my drink." He clicks the consonant and just watches Will as Hannibal manhandles him to lie still, drops one hand to work his own fly open.

"His cries then? Though he is so obedient, now, doesn't even make a sound," Mason hums, tilts his head. "Hit him again."

Hannibal sighs, draws his hand back and does it.

"Again."

Will shudders, stays quiet.

"Harder."

"Mason." Hannibal's voice is rough, almost commanding if not for the submissive way he holds his head, bowed, waiting. A reminder, perhaps, entirely wordless, to not break the boy in one night.

"Hannibal."

There is a pause, quiet, before Hannibal exhales, ducks his head further and slips his fingers into Will's hair to tug his head up. His fingers twist, and Will gasps, breathing picking up to a panic hitch as the intent is clear, how hard he will be struck against the surface of the table.

"No, no -" It's barely heard, barely breathed, and Will's eyes close tight, lips stretched in a grimace of fear as he prepares for the impact.

"Stop."

And as sudden as that, everything goes still. Hannibal sets his hands to Will's hips to hold him down but doesn't press closer, doesn't offer comfort or reassurance, just stays.

Like the good dog he is.

Will drops his hands to the table and curls his fingers, head down between his hands as though praying, body shaking, inhales wet with tears.

"Let me see those pretty eyes, Will, look at me."

When Will obeys, Mason looks the most put together he had been all night. Serious, almost concerned for a moment before that shadow passes.

"Trust," he says softly, bending to rest his hands flat on the table again. "Trust that he will return with money. With foolish youth in tow. That he will as easily tear you apart for my pleasure, not his, as he will stop when I command him to. A good dog."

Mason leans closer, Will jerks back against Hannibal until the other holds him still, by the hair again.

"It is rude to start a business relationship with debts, Will. You will pay them."

A swallow, a nod, quick and jerking and afraid.

"Do you trust me to give the next command, Will?" An almost sick smile slips Mason's lips wide. He waits, eyes on Will, watches.

There is only one answer.

Will could have his hand around Mason's throat from here, choke him with his own tie until his wild eyes roll back unseeing and his laughter dies on his lips. Let them assume it to be Hannibal, the dog finally snapping at his master, not that anyone would care in the frenzy to fill Mason's space. Disappear with Hannibal, somewhere, anywhere but this city.

He swallows hard.

Not that kind of job.

"Mason," Will breathes, sighing his name with all the tenderness he can dredge from himself, with heat swelling bruised across his face, with the taste of blood and another's name on his lips.

A shiver rattles Mason's limbs and draws a harsh laugh from him. "Oh, that does sound better than your name, Hannibal."

He stretches a hand towards Will, delighting when he flinches away from the gloved hand that strokes his cheek, more so when Will whimpers softly as Mason's thumb presses against his lips, pushes against them. He tries to turn away from it, but Hannibal's hand tightens in his hair, his body still pressed firm against Will's bare thighs to prevent him drawing away there, too.

"I do so love when a dog knows their master's voice," Mason grins, before his fingers tighten into Will's cheeks, forcing their eyes to meet again. "Loyal animals. Smart enough not to bite the hand that feeds them. But I want to hear it," he sighs, shaking Will's head from side to side, before releasing it and following with a slap that cracks loud into the room. A yelp, dizzied by it, and Will cringes, body drawing tight in on itself, as much as he can, across the desk.

Enunciating each word syllable by syllable, expression darkening, the storm of his features building towards a maelstrom, Mason asks again, "Do you trust me?"

There is only one answer.

Will nods, what little he can held bent this way, and shudders, quaking. "Yes," he sobs, "yes, I trust your next command, yes, Mason."

A happy sigh, as Mason slings himself back into his chair, rocking energetically. "Have him," he declares, focused on Hannibal now and not the aching cry that rends itself from Will. "Have him until he's bloody."

Hannibal's breath stills, and his jaw sets as he regards Will, shaking, beneath him. A moment passes, almost hesitation, before he breathes hard and releases Will's hair to reach for himself, instead.

Somewhere, anywhere but here.

Will's mind struggles to work, to find an escape past the fear dry and acidic in the back of his throat, swelling up like bile from the pit of his stomach. He imagines his hands pressed to a broad chest rather than splayed across an unyielding desk. Imagines warm fingers around his thighs rather than curled in his hair. Imagines gentle pleasures given rather than rough ones taken and suddenly sobs, an aching, childlike sound.

"Hannibal," Will pleads, choking softly, forcing himself to reach not for Hannibal, but for Mason in front of him. "Mason," he amends, doing nothing to hide the terror that exists so very real inside of him, and that Mason so clearly desires to hear.

"Enough," Mason barks suddenly, and it's all Hannibal can do not to explode beneath the weight of the breath that leaves him. He does not quickly draw away, loosening his hand from the fistful of curls slowly, and he lingers just long enough to slide Will's drawers back over his hips, some sort of cover for him.

Without Hannibal to hold him up, Will slides to the floor, rumped, the side of his face a cacophony of swollen reds and blooming blues, and heaves another sob.

"Poor puppy," clicks Mason, lips pressed into a pout of false sympathy as he leans over the desk to take in the sight of the boy. "Don't worry. We'll whip the whining out of you in no time, and you'll be just as good a dog as Hannibal. Get him off the floor," mutters Mason towards Hannibal.

The command is followed readily, Hannibal sliding into a crouch beside the younger man, one hand skimming his cheek, still undamaged from Mason's blows, from Hannibal's, before he hooks both under Will's elbows and hoists him to stand.

Desperate hands cling to his arms, curling in the fabric of his coat, still on, Will notices, unlike his own, cling higher, until Hannibal just sets him down in the chair Will had previously occupied, a hand on his shoulder holding him down unnecessarily; Will couldn't flee in this moment even if he had the inclination, limbs shaking so hard he wraps his arms around himself to stop.

Mason watches, fascinated as a child during his first snow, before his smile widens again and he laughs, head back, the sound disturbingly warm.

"Watching you two just," he shrugs, a brief, quick gesture that seems to move his entire body, "it warms me seeing you bond." He pauses, nods, then pushes himself to stand with a flourish.

"No more debt owed between you now, I think, hmm? Hannibal? Has the boy paid his due?"

A hum, disapproval and displeasure both, and Mason scoffs, blowing air between his lips in dismissal.

"I'll get you another, you can sate yourself properly until this one crawls to you on his own, relax. And you," he tilts his head, smiles, "Will. My Will. My boy. May go downstairs. Your contract is signed, the money will get to me the next time we meet, yes?"

Will nods shakily, flicks his eyes up then away.

"Good! Then the pleasures of this house are at your disposal to seek as you please. Get out. Enjoy them."

The dismissal is abundantly clear.

It takes every effort Hannibal can dredge up not to help Will dress. Not to soothe his shaking with an embrace to hold him together. Not to follow him, near-stumbling, down the stairs and out.

Will does not turn to look at Hannibal again. He stands, slowly, angled away from them both to take steady steps towards the door, and as he does he tugs up his trousers, tucks in his shirt, patient, slow motions, incapable of moving faster with how hard he's shaking. The door slips closed behind him as he tries to tug his hair across his face to hide the bruises he can feel stiffening his skin.

He doesn't resist the pipe, doesn't lie to himself that he's only doing it because it's expected - though it is - and that Mason would almost certainly take notice if Will did not partake. It hardly matters, when his skin feels coated with a filth that he knows won't wash away, a filth that slicks black and smothering around his heart and forces it to shuddering weakness.

His breath hitches, short, painful intakes that do nothing to fill his lungs, forcing a harsh pull of warm vapor into them instead from the first pipe that finds its way to his hands. Flowers, all across his tongue, to mingle with the blood cloying copper from the split inside his mouth that still feels tacky, pressed against the ivory. A few looks are spared to him, none particularly interested but perhaps for the boy who comes to add more black resinous ichor to the bowl of the pipe - a sympathy there, perhaps, or only imagined by Will's desperate need to feel not so entirely alone.

It could have been worse, he knows, he knows how much worse it could have been but Will sighs out smoke and knows, too, how much less it might have hurt, had he not - had they not, before -

The pipe is left unfinished, smoke drawing up tears in his eyes, surely, as Will takes his coat from the boy watching him wide-eyed and silent, and tries to find his way home again.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will would smile at this, mirthless, if his face would allow the motion, but it manifests instead as a grimace, jaw working stiff. "And you are here now. Did he send you?"

Blunt, but not cruel. Braced against blows that seem still poised to fall. Hannibal does not step nearer, and averts his eyes to the floor rather than the hunched figure coiled tense in front of him.

"No," he answers simply.

It's snowing again.

Heavy flakes, thick and white and untouched on the more quiet streets, illuminated orange by the lights nearby, crunching soft underfoot as Hannibal makes his way from the den, staggering from the heady effects of the pipe. Stomach full of more water than wine, and deep breaths bring his steps more even as he nears the now-familiar street.

He had held still, had feigned displeasure, indifference, when Mason had leaned against him and laughed until tears squeezed from his eyes.

A training gone well.

A new investment.

At least it had been simple to get the man away from him and to his bed, though Hannibal has to force his eyes shut thinking of the poor boy he had left with him.

It had not been Will, at least it hadn't been Will.

A poor excuse but the only comfort Hannibal can draw from the evening that slips to early, early morning around him in silence.

The boarding house is cold within, but not unbearable, and his breath steams ahead of him up the stairs. Quiet steps, soft enough to not wake inhabitants and their suspicion. The knock to Will's door is also soft, a prayer, perhaps, that he has yet to sleep, that he will let him in.

Silence within, muffled to stillness as though the snow fell there as well, maybe the shift of movement across the floorboards, so light as to perhaps only be the house settling in the cold.

Hannibal thinks of the streets he traversed to get here, each alive with threat, desperate actions by desperate people, who might have looked on a battered boy in such finery with the

same hunger Mason did. For money, for power, control and pain, and Hannibal knocks again, forehead resting against the wood, to replay his steps.

He wonders if perhaps he missed him, head clouded with smoke and anticipation, huddled bleeding from one of the knives that neighborhood prefers when it comes to taking their toll from passers-by like Will.

Another creak, soft still, but nearer, and Hannibal dares not speak Will's name but rather murmurs, "I'm here."

Will turns away as he opens the door, letting his gaze fall in an anxious sweep only to ensure that Hannibal is alone, before moving back into the small room, bare but for his trousers. Bruises darken his skin like shadows, the worst must be on his thighs, on his face, which he keeps turned away.

He says nothing to Hannibal, nothing at all, no place or time of night to raise his voice and ask him to leave. Returning to the chair beside the table instead, Will takes up his pen again, to try to set it to paper. Crumpled attempts litter the floor nearby, and a bottle of brandy sits half-finished beside him.

Hannibal closes the door, takes his time to quietly set his coat aside, to bend and unlace his shoes. When he moves again, Will flinches from it, tensing in his seat, before his hands bend over the page and crumple it beneath.

"One of the crueller tests I've seen Mason administer," he says softly, regret weighing his tone down to a rough murmur. He knows the words mean very little, perhaps even nothing, to what the young man before him had to suffer.

At his hand.

At a *command*.

"He should not demand so harsh a toll when next you see him."

"Will you?" Will's voice sounds broken, like it's cracked with the ice outside, just as sharp. "Will you demand of me?"

Hannibal swallows, takes the words as they are, does not excuse himself from them, does not turn from them.

"I would not have if there was another way, tonight."

Will would smile at this, mirthless, if his face would allow the motion, but it manifests instead as a grimace, jaw working stiff. "And you are here now. Did he send you?"

Blunt, but not cruel. Braced against blows that seem still poised to fall. Hannibal does not step nearer, and averts his eyes to the floor rather than the hunched figure coiled tense in front of him.

"No," he answers simply, and Will releases a breath, soft.

The one taken in is just as small, tight in his chest. He presses his hands along his face, mindless of the pain from it, mindless of the tremor that shakes through him, chilled not by the drafty window by which he sits but as much by the last icy trickles of adrenaline scalding cold through his limbs.

"It's your job," Will murmurs, dropping his hands into his lap. "It's mine."

"That does not excuse it," Hannibal replies, quiet, gentle, after a moment he takes another step closer, his foot brushing up against one of the discarded pages Will had crumpled and tossed away.

"It should not have to be. But you have established yourself, you've managed to gain -"

"Trust?" The word sounds like electricity, the way Will's tone bends. He swallows hard and Hannibal sets a hand against his shoulder that is instantly jerked back from, a hand coming up as though to block a blow before it lowers.

Hannibal's jaw works before he swallows.

"Yes," he says.

Will forces his hands back to his lap, folds them between his knees, coiled as though to make himself smaller, somehow, as he did across the desk in what feels, through the smoke and snow, like a nightmare from which one cannot shake the horror. He turns a little, enough, to see Hannibal's feet, ice-damp socks against the floorboards, and knows in that moment why he is there.

To stay, this time. To reconcile their own trust, beaten brittle.

"You would have, had he not stopped it," Will whispers, voice cracking. There is no accusation in his words, merely an awareness, innate. "As you should have. As you must."

He stands, older in his bones than before, hard to reconcile against the boy who spread laughing across couches, who gasped breathless against Hannibal's ear. The bottle is offered to Hannibal, and his face studied at length by darkened eyes, the extent of bruising, of swelling, the blackened eye and split lip now laid bare.

"I cannot imagine what else he has made you do," he breathes, to absorb Hannibal's pain instead of his own, that discord rather than the one now that, louder than before, promises retribution for what transpired here. "I - I would have forgiven you."

"I wouldn't," the words are breathed, barely clicked to actual voicing before Hannibal shakes his head, doesn't accept the bottle offered, doesn't accept the passive non-resistance. Another swallow.

"I have not. For many things. And that is a weight Mason enjoys seeing on me, I let him see it." He looks up, past the rims of his glasses, over at Will, who stands so small, suddenly, damaged and hurt in front of him.

“He waited for you to stop it,” he tells him. “He waited to see you break, to reveal who you are. He is paranoid, suspicious. He is impulsive and stupid, and that will bring him down, but you did not break for him.”

The words are said with as much conviction as Hannibal can manage, but his brows still furrow, the curve of his lips is etched in pain. He reaches out, gently, to draw the back of a finger over Will’s lip, holds his hand aloft when Will flinches back, waits for him to step closer on his own.

“He will not ever manage to.” And that seems almost like a promise, a deep, warm pride in the words before Hannibal drops his hand.

The bottle is set aside again and Will, shaking still, takes Hannibal's hand between his own. To control the movements that startle him so, and bring Hannibal's fingers back against his mouth. He remembers how they tasted, the resin and the smoke, and was it only last night that they splayed across his mouth in affection? Ages ago, it seems, when his ears still ring in memory of being struck.

"The only acceptable way to break is death," Will whispers, attempting to assure them both. "And I do not fear it."

A step closer, breath hitching sharp and sudden. Will's eyes close in a twist of pain that presses through the poppies as he squeezes Hannibal's hand to his cheek, hot beneath his fingers, to feel that touch again rather than the one that left it wounded. "What I fear is the attempt."

He breathes a wrenching sound that might, once, have been a laugh, now shot through with bitterness, acrid on his tongue. "What I fear is not a single madman, but that even if we both survive him, what awaits us is the gaol. I should not have started this, Hannibal, I should have," he stammers, breath hitching shorter and shorter, tears pressed bright beneath his eyes. "I should have left it alone, if I had, if I didn't know how it felt, then maybe - maybe tonight would not have been -"

Hannibal gathers Will closer, steps up so that they're pressed from knee to chest, together, close, one hand still against Will's cheek, the other around his shoulders, bent, fingers gentle in his hair where earlier they had yanked it, hurt him.

Warm lips to Will's temple and soft words in that language Will doesn't know, as the young man shatters in his hold, wraps his arms around Hannibal to hold him close and sobs. The sounds wracking his body, shuddering out of him and making him seem so much smaller, so much younger. The boy again in fear as he had been in pleasure.

“It will keep waiting,” he assures him, sliding his hand free of Will’s face to curl around his hip, warm, reassuring against cold skin that trembles even still, as Will draws in air like a man drowning, every panic, every worry, every desperate sensation of terror pouring forth from a boy who had held so strong, so stoic when it mattered most. “It will keep waiting and never know our names, Will, it will not swallow us and spit us free.”

He wants to tell him so much more, he wants to utter apologies and promises, but where he will mean one he cannot guarantee the other and so he holds, just holds, strokes soft fingers over Will's skin to feel the warmth return to it.

"You are so certain," Will laughs, dire and aching. "Hell." His arms fall away from Hannibal to wrap around his neck instead, his limbs as cold as the rest of him. "He cannot be allowed," Will breathes, voice shaking as hard as the rest of him but a fierce certainty in this, if nothing else. "He cannot, what interests come in - in usurping him, I don't care. What becomes of me, I care even less."

Tears still slick against his cheek, but in Will a fury now, anger replacing hurt. "His marks everywhere, on you, on those - those boys. There is no place in the world for monsters such as this."

His arms grow tighter around Hannibal's neck, his only stability now, eyes wide to keep away the spectres that haunt behind them. Every bruise struck against every urchin, Will's hands, every taunting hateful laugh at Hannibal's suffering, his voice.

"I feel as though the filth will never leave me," Will murmurs, shuddering, into Hannibal's neck, fingers seeking into his hair, still damp with snow, to hold there, too. "I hate this place. I will not leave you in it."

Almost childlike now despite his twenty-odd years, his declarations dropping desperate, exhausted, as he touches a kiss to Hannibal's neck, so soft it may not have been felt but for the chill of his lips.

"I will not," he swears low, "not in this place, with its soot and starless skies and unkindness and snow." Will swallows hard and mutters weakly, "Dreadful weather."

"And where will you take me, dear boy?" comes the exhausted reply, but Hannibal expects no answer. He draws his arms over Will, higher up his back then down, seeking to warm him, to rub life back to his limbs where he had let them cool in an attempt to stave off nightmares, to freeze his skin clean.

Another kiss against his neck and Hannibal sighs, head ducked, eyes closed, before pulling back, just enough, just *there*, so that Will's lips brush his own when he tries again.

A sound, then, something as soft as the night before, something as genuine.

Hannibal parts his lips and pulls back to breathe, to feel Will's answering breaths still quick against him until they slow, until he curls his hand to press the cold backs of his fingers to the bruise on Will's cheek, to ease the heat of it a little. His thumb up to dry the tears now sticky on Will's face.

Will turns into the touch, eyes closed again, perhaps still too hurt to look the man in the eye though he has relaxed, now. Hannibal caresses the skin until it feels cool to him, not the other way around, then turns Will just enough to kiss there, lips over the sensitive skin as though he could rub the pain away with something so simple.

A sigh, longer than all those before it, and he tilts his head to seek another, to seek comfort where he has no other, alone here but for Hannibal. Will allows the kisses, soft as snow against his cheek, beneath his eye that tomorrow will be twice as swollen, again across his lips, and again, and again.

He hardly knows the man, a name that may or may not be his own, and little more but that he is not who he says he is, and that he does not, in fact, exist in this place. But he is here, now, in Will's arms and pressed fast against him, and it hardly matters. Together they exist, in some plane known only to them, and though it was Hannibal's blows that struck him, Will knows that it was not, truly. He knows that for the fear that turned his stomach over in the street, that sent him silent in pain and shock, he was not alone.

"If it had to be anyone," Will whispers, "I would have been glad it was you."

"Not like that," Hannibal sighs, eyes barely open, but regarding Will patiently, *seeing* him as he had pretended not to in the den, as he had pretended to Mason never to have done.

He splays a hand against one of the bruises on Will's chest and looks at the stark difference between his skin tone and Will's, dark on pale, scarred and worked against pure and smooth.

"I will show you everything but it will be in our time, in a place of our choosing, never there." The words seem harsh from his lips, but the anger slips past Will, fortifies around him as a shield, it does not strike him as his own hands had done hours before.

Without a word, he bends, down to one knee, to bring himself level with the marr against the skin. He presses his lips there, as well, in atonement, hands flat and light against Will's sides, resting, not pressing him still.

Watching Hannibal, a shiver courses the length of Will's spine, neither the rush of fear nor the chill from the window this time, a warm sensation that snarls softly in his stomach and pushes another little sound from him.

"And where will you take me?" Will murmurs in response, some distant amusement in his words, expecting no more answer than Hannibal did.

He leans until Hannibal's hands support him more, hold his waist, fingers splayed against his ribs, and watches heavy-lidded as the older man's mouth brushes his bare skin. Visible now that they're not pressed so tightly together, a scar runs coarse across the top of Will's shoulder, an older injury to which Will pays little mind in exposing when there are so many more pressing matters to attend.

Catching his lower lip between his teeth, Will reaches to press his fingers through Hannibal's hair, both hands curling to feel soft straight strands beneath them and trailing lower until he reaches his glasses.

A hesitation, time enough to stop him, but when Hannibal does not, Will removes them gently. He holds them to his own face first, a passing, quiet amusement to regard Hannibal through them, and then sets them beside the brandy to return his hands to frame Hannibal's face instead.

“Anywhere else,” Will finally answers.

Hannibal hums, eyes up to Will’s a moment longer before he drops them to regard the rest of the marks over Will’s skin. Where he had pressed him down, where he had struck him, hard, for Mason’s delight and amusement and his own dread.

His mouth travels lower, to the taut stomach, a shadow blooming there from his fist, he knows its counterparts are reddening against Will’s thighs.

He parts his lips wide to sigh soft over the mark, brushes just his lips over it, in a gentle rough drag of skin to skin until Will shivers. He will take him anywhere, away from here. To New York. To California. To the ruins of old Europe and the promise of new horizons. He will take him from this place just to never see such marks on him again.

He ducks his head lower still, nose just brushing above the waistband of Will’s pants and there Will tenses, curls his fingers in warning, harsh for a moment in Hannibal’s hair, and he stops, kisses under his navel and lifts his face to Will again, allows the gentle exploration of fingers to his cheeks, down his nose, over his lips.

“Better known for next time that this will follow,” Will sighs, a tired laugh lifting the sound. His thumb strokes across Hannibal’s mouth, this the only memory from the night before still unmarred. No harsh words for him, to echo the blows, no unkindness spoken but only words in his defense, what could be shown of it, and in praise for his steadfastness.

Will leans, palm sliding to Hannibal’s cheek, and kisses him. Close-lipped and tentative first, and slowly relaxing, tender urgency. His hands pass Hannibal’s and rest against the waistband of his trousers. Fighting the tremor in his fingers, he works them quickly to the fly and there, not yet bared, waits.

“Show me.”

Trust.

Too much bared already tonight, even as Will’s thighs thrum with bruises, sore enough he could hardly sit before the brandy, each risen swollen beneath Hannibal’s fist and now aching instead for his mouth, the careful kisses that have come so far and stopped.

“Your - your shirt, at least,” Will stammers softly. “Please, I want to see you.”

Hannibal keeps his eyes up, on Will’s, not on his hands, not on the nervous, slow baring. He watches the man that matters beneath as he slowly brings his hands to his own shirt to work the buttons, a slow blink, a tug to untuck his shirt and then it’s off his shoulders and to the floor behind him and he pushes himself up higher on his knee, dropping his other leg to bend as well, so he’s in front of Will as though in prayer.

Palms flat, warm, just under the waistband now and sliding the fabric slowly down as Will releases his fingers from around it and allows.

The bruises are growing dark at the sides, Hannibal knows, further back, but he doesn't turn Will for it yet, leans in to worship them where he can see for the moment, sighing softly at the feeling of slowly warming fingers in his hair again, splaying and curling as Will's breathing picks up and hitches, but no longer in panic and fear.

Slowly, Hannibal sinks lower until he can sit comfortably, the backs of his fingers still cooler than his palms and fingertips skirting the sensitive skin at the side of Will's knees, down his calves, over defined ankles as his lips continue their slow journey over the expanse of skin he'd wrought this pain on.

It is a fearful thing, even this, and Will watches Hannibal carefully, face flushed to scarlet even beyond the dark echoes of bruises. Forcing his breath to steady, he tilts his head a little, lower lip drawing between his teeth.

A small sound, afraid of his own relief, as Hannibal rests his fingers beside his lips on a bruise already swollen visibly. He twists his fingers through Hannibal's hair, the next noise more breathless still, as Hannibal follows the movement, pliable and soft beneath Will's ginger touch.

He shifts him slowly and draws Hannibal against him, hands wrapped loose over Will's feet, and his cheek brought to rest against the younger man's battered thigh. Careful fingers stroke through Hannibal's hair, some somber appreciation of what he does now to mend their tenuous accord. Will lets them slip, to trace the curve of Hannibal's neck, down to his shoulder, stronger even than he looks now that Will can feel the shift of hard-won muscle beneath his fingertips.

He could have hurt Will far worse, Will knows with a sudden sharp sensation in his ribs, vast power restrained but for that needed to convince Mason of his sincerity. His fingers spread along Hannibal's shoulders, his back, tracing the lines illuminated there by the warm paraffin glow. Capable of immense brutality, when driven to it, and equally capable of this particular tenderness, driven to it only by himself.

The words of thanks catch in his throat, far more frail than he means them to sound when his lips part enough to murmur only, "Thank you, Hannibal."

A hum, soft, and Hannibal finally presses a warm kiss to the less damaged skin at the top of Will's thigh. He says nothing but slowly unfolds himself from the floor to stand, head ducked to watch Will still, lips parting gently on a breath when he feels his fingers tug against his belt, work to undo his pants as well.

This is not the heat and impatience of the night before, this is not the cruelty and coldness of hours ago, this is something else entirely.

A trust that Mason claims he has, and will never understand the depth of.

"You need to sleep," Hannibal tells him softly, eyes up to catch Will's, just watching.

Hands spreading along Hannibal's hips, Will draws closer now, sinking slow kisses across his shoulder, towards his throat. He tilts his head and traces parted lips against Hannibal to feel

his breath pool warm against him. His fingers tug and work, fumbling a little before Hannibal's pants come loose, resting open against him.

"Can you stay?" Will asks, searching Hannibal's expression. "Is it safe?"

"I will stay," he responds, tracing the back of his fingers down Will's unharmed cheek. "If you sleep."

Will does not ask him again.

Instead, he tucks another kiss beneath his jaw. A study in sensation, to experience Hannibal in this way, the excruciating gentleness of his hands as they spread along Will's back, the heat of him when Will's hands, daring, press to Hannibal's chest in turn. The feel of Hannibal's heart beneath his fingertips is only broken when the other man takes Will's hand into his own, fingers laced.

Will leans to blow out the paraffin lamp, drawing Hannibal behind him, and he shuffles into the bed, small awkward movements, without releasing his hand.

It's narrow, forcing them close, and Will curls against the older man with his arms in against his chest, palms to Hannibal's, legs tentatively slipping together to tangle comfortably. He closes his eyes when his hair is stroked from his forehead. His fingers squeeze the hand still held in his.

Hannibal just watches him, the way his pupils widen here, to take in as much light as the window allows, now that the light is gone, he watches the way the outline remains pristine blue, utterly ethereal, like water, clean like country rain.

He doesn't want to tell him that Mason will hurt him again. Perhaps not this way but he will raise a hand to him, he will train Will to cry on command and close his mouth when it irks him. He will train Will until Will is as deadened to the world around Mason as Hannibal is.

Or he will try, and every night Hannibal will coax him back so he never loses that delight in the world around him.

He ducks his head and finally kisses him again, a deep slow thing that pulls an exhale soft over Will's cheek, that closes his eyes and opens him entirely to the sensation of another body so close, so willing and warm and trusting.

No longer a fearful thing, not now, and not like this, laid foolishly bare against the other and Will left breathless by Hannibal's kiss, the feel of someone else so near, the mere idea of sleeping alongside someone in such a way.

Easy to pretend, here, that there are no debts owed, no expectations or demands upon them, no one waiting for them, good or bad, no snow to mask the stars.

Easy to pretend, here, that nothing matters but for the way Hannibal's chest hair curls beneath Will's fingers, or the way he slides his fingers through Will's hair, or how their legs feel twined so tightly together as this.

Will cannot imagine sleep now, not when Hannibal's lips spread so firm against his own and their palms are still pressed together. He leans into the kiss and tucks an arm over Hannibal's chest to hold himself near, mindless of the bruises that already stiffen across his body.

"Sleep," Hannibal breathes against Will's mouth when they part, tilting his nose against his cheek. "I will stay."

There is no space between them for declarations beyond this, and for now, it is enough.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Will's fingers lift and push softly against Hannibal's cheek, exhaling a little laugh between their mouths when Hannibal slides an arm across him to squeeze them closer still.

No lies, no deceptions. No servants and no spies. Only two men, undertakers of a life few enough will ever know exists.

Sunday morning dawns grey in London.

In truth there are few days at all that do not, even the sunniest of them haloed with the corona of soot. But this is particularly grey, Will notices, unable to take his eyes from the billows of clouds forming a plush ceiling in the sky, fat with snow. More than that, he is especially unable to turn his eyes towards the source of warmth at his back.

He reaches, instead, without turning. Careful fingers seek out blind and feel beneath them a wrist, then follow the curves of a forearm far thicker than his own, higher still until his fingers brush against Hannibal's ribs, and the older man grunts softly in his sleep.

Will grins a little, known to no one but himself.

Far warmer than the threat of snow outside, and more heat still to be found, but it isn't until Will begins a cautious shift to turn without rousing Hannibal that he feels the pull of injuries sharpen through his body. He stifles a rough cry behind his hand and closes his eyes, forcing his heart to still as it sparks to racing. There is no danger here, he tells himself, no cruelty, no. He does not let himself think on it, forcing the truth to be still, be silent before the sight of Hannibal as he completes his turn to face him, and observes the man, tousled and gentled, entirely.

Will finds himself grateful for the dimmed morning light, muted from any harshness that might illuminate their folly too quickly, and with a cautious lean to close the distance between them - grimacing a little in doing so - Will touches a small kiss to the corner of Hannibal's mouth.

The man does not stir and it pleases Will immensely, resting his cheek against his arm to watch Hannibal from so near.

In sleep, he looks, at last, entirely relaxed. Perhaps not younger but certainly softer. No furrow in his brow, no lines of tension at his lips. They rest slack now, just partially open as he breathes softly in rest. Will feels his smile return, widening before it settles to gentleness.

Hannibal is vulnerable here, sleepy and helpless and entirely trusting of Will to share that with him. Will doesn't move closer, he rests as he is, warm beneath the covers, contented to watch Hannibal, to listen to him breathe.

And then something stirs him from slumber, perhaps the innate reaction to being seen, to being scrutinized and watched, something close to instinct that moves Hannibal's eyes beneath his lids before they slowly open to reveal dark eyes barely focused and warm. Will sighs and bites the corner of his lip.

"Good morning."

Without a word, Hannibal leans closer, curls his body to, ducks his head to rest his forehead to Will's before another soft sigh arches his back and brings their lips together in a languid, slow kiss.

He knows his body feels, with any movement, as though it's been dragged beneath a carriage across cobblestones but for Will, in this moment, he can hardly feel it, and sleepy enough that the kiss surprises him, truly. An unfathomable comfort to awaken beside another in this way, unfamiliar and new, and better still to be beside Hannibal. Hannibal who knows him, much as one can, who understands their peril, who understands the sacrifices necessary.

It was not Hannibal who laid these bruises in his skin, Will tells himself, no more than it was Will who played coy and winsome for Mason's pleasure. Far easier to believe now, with the crisp promise of snow outside and they, warm beneath the blankets under which they lay pressed together. Easier than it will be to believe the next time Mason asks his dog to keep the puppy in his place, and each suffers for it.

Will's fingers lift and push softly against Hannibal's cheek, exhaling a little laugh between their mouths when Hannibal slides an arm across him to squeeze them closer still.

No lies, no deceptions. No servants and no spies. Only two men, undertakers of a life few enough will ever know exists.

He doesn't speak, no need, when Hannibal kisses him like that and steals away any breath that would fuel unnecessary words, but braver than the night before, Will brings the lengths of their bodies together. He slips a leg slowly, cautiously, up Hannibal's own, until it tips over his hip and he blushes brightly. The insecurities are kissed from his mouth one by one by Hannibal, until Will stops trying to offer them and simply grins.

He tilts his nose alongside Hannibal's and brings a hand through the older man's tousled hair, observing the fall of his eyelashes across his cheeks, the languorous parting of his lips as he seeks out Will's shoulder across the old scar, up along his neck, even his fingertips when Will offers those as well to feel his mouth move against them.

It's so intimate, so close, and Will sighs a laugh instead of voicing it, bending a little to kiss over Hannibal's hair, warm and straight over his forehead.

They shift, just barely but enough to feel, to register, and Will allows it, turns to rest on his back, arches up to keep them close when the motion dislodges the blankets a little and the

cold threatens them. One arm comes up to pull them back over Hannibal's shoulders, as Hannibal's hands seek to slip over Will's thighs and draw a helpless sound of pain, not pleasure, when he touches a bruise there.

Everything stills, Will's eyes wide with worry and regret, but Hannibal simply sets his palm to the mattress beside him and leans in to press his nose alongside Will's.

"You will need to keep them warm," he tells him softly, voice still sleep-rough. "Now that you've sufficiently chilled the bruises the night before. You need the blood to flow again."

Will tilts his head a bit, not turning away from the little nudge, but leaning into it, nuzzling gently in return, seeking out Hannibal's mouth for a soft, small kiss, and then another, until he feels Hannibal's tongue just touch to his own and shivers. It snares him entirely, curling his toes and pulling another breath of laughter from him, nearly tickled by it.

"I'm not certain I could do much more than keep them warm," he acknowledges. "I anticipate that a day beneath the blankets, away from the snow, would be expected?"

Hoping, without saying so, that they won't be needed today, and Hannibal's quiet hum is enough to ease the worry from him.

Gingerly, Will slips his arms around Hannibal's neck, careful at first so as not to shift himself too much, and then holding securely around him. Flushed, heart racing, his eyes wide as they take in the sight of Hannibal so near and so tender, and so immensely above him as he is now. His lower lip snares between his teeth, eyes closing just a little as he adjusts, a deliberate movement but seemingly unintentional, to bring their hips together again.

"You are," he laughs, "quite warm, actually, in lieu of a water bottle. I may have one - there must be one somewhere here - but..."

But he'd rather not get up, with Hannibal pressed against him like this, with his body as sore as it is, and he lets the gentle flow of words be quieted by another kiss, seeking out the touch of Hannibal's tongue again to feel another shiver, bright, as they trace against each other.

It is the first time in daylight that Hannibal can see Will this way, eyes bright when they're open, flush just creeping to his cheeks and down his neck in pleasure and nervous anticipation. The bruise on his face is darkening, a large thing, shapeless for how much Will squirmed when struck, but the intent clear enough.

He thinks perhaps that Mason meant bones to be broken, meant fists to be used instead of the flat palm.

He knows Will will wear the bruise like a badge next time Hannibal is forced to take him to the den, Mason will be satisfied, appeased for a time until his paranoia rises and his need for *hurt* returns and roars through him.

He slides his hands down again, gentler this time, wary of the sensitive skin and not to press with his fingertips, and gently eases Will's legs open to settle between them. He feels the

gasp more than hears it, shifting the hair just above his ear, and when he looks up again Will's eyes are wide and lips parted in surprise.

"What do you do," Hannibal asks him, leaning his body closer, a gentle friction for Will as he does, enough to draw another barely voiced groan, "when not at the inn?"

Will hardly hears the question over the rush of blood in his ears, finding himself gently pinned beneath his partner in this way. He's grateful for the guidance, strong hands soft against his thighs to settle them, unsure that he could even think clearly enough right now to arrange himself without a more assured touch. And with Hannibal so near as this, almost unbearably attractive beyond the roughness with which he shields himself - although perhaps for that, as well - Will would be lucky to remember to breathe.

Take the pleasure I show you.

He will, just that. Will brings his legs a little more snug against Hannibal's hips, sighing against his ear as another brush of friction sends a pleasant curl of tension through his belly.

Far too distracted - blissfully overwhelmed - the question is remembered only after long seconds pass, and he hides a crooked little grin against Hannibal's shoulder.

"I correspond with my employers," he offers, pensive, stealing kisses as punctuation to his words. "I try not to stay here all day - the walls feel too close, after a time - and so I visit the parks. To watch the birds, the people." He smiles faintly, sweetly softened by such a human conversation. "I'd like to call myself a naturalist, but even 'amateur' seems excessive, it's - *oh*," he breathes eager when their hips meet again, "it's mostly just squinting at plants, ah, forgetting their names. Startling squirrels."

Will doesn't mention how scarce those things feel, when so much of his time is committed to the force - how even when he's not in service, the thoughts linger so long that it feels as though it never ends. He doesn't mention his house in the country, his dogs, his tutoring of the children of country wealth to supplement his income, or how he would much rather be doing that most days than treading through alleyways and flophouses and blood. Better not to share too much truth, when it all could become a liability if compromised.

"And you," Will sighs eager, bringing his nose against Hannibal's jaw, fond and flushed. "Who are you when you're not there?"

Hannibal hums, tilts his head to accept the eager affection, delighting in the soft breaths, the quiet sounds of genuine need, genuine innocent enjoyment. He finds that no other sound is sweeter to him than the little 'oh' Will makes when their hips meet, continues distracting him to those with playful determination.

"I keep up my languages," he offers, voice low, quiet, an intimate sharing of knowledge and space and togetherness. "I know six. I walk. Some days I pity the horses that trot the city, in their blinders, chewing bits."

He wants to take them both away, pull off the heavy saddles, bridles, let the creatures run free in a field of clean air and long grasses.

A subtle adjustment of their position and he feels Will harder against his thigh with a tremble and an arch of his back. He is utterly breathtaking in pleasure, and Hannibal lowers his head to kiss beneath his jaw, mirror the gesture of running his nose against it.

Both shift now in time together, bodies rocking in a way that is no longer incidental, but delightfully deliberate. Incomparably thrilling, every press and rub and feel of his hardness grinding slow against Hannibal's thigh pulls another soft sound from Will, stills his breath in his chest and makes his heart feel as though there's too much blood in it, and it's spilling all throughout his chest, hot and thick.

Will thinks of the horses now, and how they turn their noses with affection against another, even so shackled, the familiarity of a friend and the comfort of a careful touch. He thinks of the man who thinks of them, and pushes a hand back through his hair to sweep it from his eyes, bottomless dark and beautifully hooded.

They kiss again, and this time it's Will who drives forward into it. He curves himself with each twist that brings their bodies together, hips rocking deep and needy, pressing himself upward with an elegant arch to feel Hannibal's length against his belly, rubbing slow. A shiver intense enough to curl Will's toes tugs another little sound from him and he grins, lip caught between his teeth, as he slips a hand - slowly, very slowly - down Hannibal's side and between them.

He's certain he'll come to regret all this movement, when his bruises continue to darken and the dread returns of how many he'll bear next time, and the time after, but the sound Hannibal makes - that low purring rumble against Will's throat - when Will's fingers graze the tip of his cock nearly undoes him in an instant. He doesn't need to see it, not when feeling it is so exquisite, the damp drip gathered at the tip of the soft skin surrounding it, the way it twitches in response to his fingers when they press along the length of it, the sinuous raised curve of a vein, down to the curls of hair at its base.

"I haven't, ever," Will breathes. He knows it's transparent enough, but it feels like something he should say, in that moment, when the newness of the experience is so entirely extraordinary. "I mean, my own, but - it's," he swallows, a note of laughter on his sigh, "it's lovely."

Pressing the flat of his palm against Hannibal's length, Will watches - eyes barely open and lips parted in anticipation - as he rubs his hand against him.

Hannibal shivers, shifts to almost loom over Will, head ducked to watch him, lips parted to breathe gentle sounds against him, responding to the welcome touch.

It has been a long time; Mason had spoken truth of Hannibal's proclivities but only to a point. They had never been young boys. Never been unwilling. Hannibal had courted a young man a long time ago, before the smoke had invaded his mind and set the ring in his nose by which Mason pulled him. It had been passionate, secret, until there were no secrets anymore.

The young man had endured, then he had gone. The trust between them had been seeped away, to the man now holding Hannibal's entire world in the clasp of a pipe.

It has been a long time since Hannibal had felt the inclination for such closeness, both wary and weary, anticipating nothing but his job and the long days ahead of doing it.

"I rarely," he admits, breathless, another sound leaving him as Will's fingers gain confidence enough to curl now, "but it is always a pleasure twofold when shared."

He licks his lips and kisses Will again, one hand down to slip between them and pull Will's away. He presses it to the mattress near the pillow, fingers threaded together, held tight, his other he seeks with, adjusting until he can take them both in hand and stroke that way. Marveling at the moan that leaves Will weak and flushed, lips parted and head back.

Hannibal's hand feels nothing like Will's own, strong and rough and so hot against his skin, the callouses of work and the careful grip, finger tracing across the slick tip of Will's cock and pulling from him a laugh, breathless and giddy as his eyes roll closed. To feel another man against him in this way, equally hard, equally desirous, is a wonder that Will never let himself think he would feel. Imagined, perhaps, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, but never an indulgence that would present itself to him.

Until now.

Until Hannibal.

His partner, who understands and who knows and who cares for Will the same way that Will cares for him, who wants nothing more than to see the other out of this place alive and whole. The relief in the thought steals Will's breath as much as the touch that presses them together, and his kiss is achingly soft when it meets Hannibal's mouth again, fingers tightening together where their hands are held.

"Show me everything, Hannibal."

Will arches again, to press their bodies closer still together, to let no cold pass between them, to feel Hannibal's hardness against his own, and he scarlets at the thought of it, as though he could see it even with his eyes closed, his grin small and bright from beneath the tousle of hair in his face. There may never be another time for them but on this job together. There may never be another place for them but London.

"Everything."

"Shh," a soft tone, fond, Hannibal's smile evident without having to see it, and soft lips brush Will's cheek, down his jaw to under it again.

His hand twists, brings Will to breathless shivering and writhing for him. A hum and Hannibal pulls back with a gentle look, letting him go.

"Let me," he asks, knowing his answer already, reassurance, now, more than permission. "Lie still."

Another kiss, a warm palm to Will's chest to hold him still, and Hannibal bends his back, slips beneath the blankets, kissing his way over Will's skin until the other stills, realizing

where he's going.

"Hannibal -"

Another hum, cool palms stroking gentle over the insides of Will's thighs to spread them wider before his lips follow, teasing the skin, tickling it.

Will would tell him to stop - to insist against even his own wishes, the threat that comes with crossing this line swinging wide open so near them, breath hitching faster - but for Hannibal's mouth stealing his words again. There, just there against his thigh, a pleasurable shudder jerking his body nearly rigid at the feeling, and splitting a wide, boyish grin across his lips.

"Hannibal," Will purrs again, a whole new tone to his gentle exclamations of the man's name. He stretches his fingers down through his hair, tousled still from sleep and moreso now, both unbelievably bare it seems, freed of all the starched collars and stiff jackets that now - by compare to this - seem so confined.

Another press of lips, higher still, just in the crook of Will's leg, draws a laugh, hips rising in an involuntary shift towards another kiss that greets his skin readily.

Will only then remembers Hannibal's amused instruction to *stay still* and realizes he's doing nothing of the sort - he couldn't if he truly wanted to, when Hannibal's lips move higher, into the tight dark curls of hair there, and finally -

"Oh," Will sighs shaking, pressing a hand against his eyes, the other fingers twitching tighter in Hannibal's hair. "Oh my."

"Breathe," an amused purr, whether Will feels it or hears it is irrelevant when he feels those same lips graze up the underside of his cock, part around the head and envelope it in the most incredible heat.

"Oh God." A swallow, thick to Will's ears, a shudder and a tightening of fingers in Hannibal's hair as the heat engulfs more of him, sucks him down, spreads his tongue against him until another sound is drawn from Will's throat, entirely helpless and desperate.

It has been too long since a man has shuddered so in pleasure for Hannibal, too long since he has given someone such pleasure that they would tug his hair, draw knees up high and arch up. It is a pleasure like no other, for him, to feel Will's gentle twitching against his hand that still holds him down, holds his thighs parted.

He pulls back, cooler hands up to stroke just beneath the head before drawing the skin back and tonguing the slit until Will writhes for him, shaking now, panting his pleasure rather than just sighing it.

"Hannibal please, it's..."

A hum of amused agreement as Hannibal takes him deep again, and he would grin, could the boy see him, with the response the gentle action draws.

Will catches a keening sound behind his teeth, sunk into his bottom lip, pressing his hand down from his eyes to cover his mouth instead. The walls are thin in places like this, the floorboards thinner yet, and he could sob aloud for how extraordinary it feels for Hannibal's mouth to wrap such beautiful heat around him, smooth and damp and lovely.

His blush spills over his nose, across his cheeks, blooming bright down his neck and shoulders to nearly his chest, body twisting outside of his control to press against Hannibal's strong, soft tongue. The firm hands that press against his hips to the stuffed mattress are the only reason he hasn't yet bucked himself right off the bed, pulse fluttering fast enough to shake his limbs, tremble his fingers, bring him twitching down to his toes that curl into the blankets and press him upward still.

For all his cleverness, his immense imagination, his vivid visualizations, Will could never have predicted this.

A tightening twist in his stomach warns him, and Will drops a desperate hand from over his mouth to cup it against Hannibal's cheek instead in an attempt to tug him upward, gasping. It can't be over so soon, not when Hannibal is still there, still willing to do this, to share this with him - not when every slight movement sends sparks along Will's skin - not when every broad swipe of tongue and rumbling hum makes him dizzy...

"Please," Will stammers, pleading, "I'm going to - I'll - if you don't - hell -"

Will tilts his head down, panting, and blinks, suddenly still as he watches Hannibal's lips slide slow to the head of his cock. Hannibal's eyes turn curiously up towards him, and when their gaze meets, Will's lips part on a sweet, aching little sound scarcely the length of a breath.

"Hannibal," he sighs, eyes rolling closed as the man's name arcs into a groan, a sound that mirrors the bend of his back as his entire body unfurls at once.

It's hot, almost feverish in how good it is, and Will squirms, trembles, twists and tries to make this last longer than it has - embarrassed at how quickly he had finished, unable to control himself with the feeling of Hannibal's mouth.

And then that mouth is close again, over his nipples and up his chest, to his jaw and to his lips and Will tastes himself, salty, bitter, unusual and so welcome when it's Hannibal encouraging him.

"Will," he replies softly, pulling back with a smile that is far too pleased, so warmly amused.

Sighing past a little grin, Will brings their mouths together in embarrassed response. Still-shaking fingers find their way to Hannibal's lips, between their kiss, fascinated appreciation for what just transpired.

"I didn't mean to," Will starts, glowing flushed and pleased despite his own protestations, "I didn't want it to end so quickly."

Still tracing the curves of Hannibal's smile, Will runs a hand through his straight, soft strands of hair as well before murmuring into a kiss.

"I should very much enjoy doing it again, however," he offers, nearly laughing. Entirely aware of Hannibal's hardness against his thigh, his brows lift a little in sleepy curiosity, blue eyes bright. "Perhaps I could - as well, I mean."

A hum of pleasure, another kiss, and Hannibal sets his hand soft against Will's bruised cheek, thumb caressing barely-there touches just under his eye.

"Perhaps when you have healed," he says, dismissing one suggestion, but he doesn't move to leave, doesn't pull farther back from Will than he has to, to examine the rest of his injuries.

Fingers skim Will's stomach, over his ribs and higher still. Up his arm to his wrist, which Hannibal kisses, surely still sore from where it had been twisted and held, to his fingers which get the same gentle attention before Hannibal guides Will's hand to his cock again, sighs out in deep, warm pleasure at the touch.

"Just there," a soft encouragement, before Hannibal curls his shoulders again, presses another breathless kiss to Will's lips.

"Yes," agrees Will, a breathless little assent apropos of nothing in particular but the weight of Hannibal's cock in his curled fingers again, the heat of his body and the kindness of his kiss.

He's almost glad that he's spent already, allowed a focus by that release that lets his fingers memorize every curve of soft-hard skin beneath them. Teasing the skin around the tip, sliding it back enough to press against the damp slit the way that Hannibal did to him pulls a low noise from the man.

Will's grin widens.

Gripping just softly beneath the swollen head, Will strokes and tugs, very gently. It's hard to gauge how much is too much, when it's not only yourself, and Hannibal's cock feels so different than Will's own. Larger, certainly - bigger around where his fingers wrap, and weighty.

Will realizes he has his tongue between his lips in concentration and quickly removes it.

"Is this - is it alright?" Will asks, turning his cheek against Hannibal's to nuzzle a kiss against the corner of his mouth.

A breathless groan and a parting of lips and Will has his answer.

Slow pulls, gentle twists until Hannibal's hand joins his own and he is encouraged to grip tighter, to stroke faster, a subtle application of nails and Hannibal makes a sound he has to stifle against Will's shoulder, unable to contain it within himself.

Will does it again, once more, feels the way Hannibal trembles hard against him, the way he parts his knees wider to press closer and harder to Will's hand. It's an exquisite feeling of

power, and Hannibal allows it, allows himself the vulnerability, trusts Will to catch him when he falls, with it.

It doesn't take long, and Will flushes knowing he is the cause of this, the one responsible for the stickiness between his fingers, for the quick breaths against his skin.

He did this.

He brought Hannibal to this, merely by being himself.

"Sorry," he sighs at length, licking his lips close enough to Will's cheek to gently dampen it before he just kisses there instead. "I didn't expect it to be over this quickly myself."

A gentle teasing, a warm and welcome thing, and Hannibal allows himself to rest his weight on Will again, head tucked against his shoulder, mindless of the mess between them for the moment.

Will's arms surround him, looped so gently around his neck, the aches returning to his bones in his relief. He pays them little mind, much more occupied with the comforting weight of Hannibal laying heavy across him, with the warmth spilled laughing between them, with the beat of Hannibal's heart against his own.

"Maybe sometime, we could walk together," Will murmurs. "Bring apples to the horses. Listen to the birds."

He doesn't know if he means here and now, or there and then, but it hardly matters. Pressing a kiss to Hannibal's hair, Will softly strokes the older man's back. He watches the snow build against the window until his eyes drift closed, reassured at least for now that the cold can't reach them here.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

It is difficult, even in my years of service, for me to describe the situation at hand in such a way as to convey the gravity of what I have encountered in my brief time here. While my constitution has remained strong through numerous trying events in the past, I find it increasingly challenged. I will make my greatest effort to describe as best I may.

I will begin factually.

Chapter Notes

VERY SERIOUS WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: child abuse, sexual abuse

We really can't overemphasize how horrific Mason is, and if you think even distantly this might be too distressing, we'd recommend skipping over this chapter and waiting for the next.

To my faithful friend,

An apology first, in due order, for the delay in correspondence. You will perhaps rest assured in knowing that I was held from doing so in service to your request, and have been diligent in making strides towards that end.

It is difficult, even in my years of service, for me to describe the situation at hand in such a way as to convey the gravity of what I have encountered in my brief time here. While my constitution has remained strong through numerous trying events in the past, I find it increasingly challenged. I will make my greatest effort to describe as best I may.

I will begin factually.

Outside, the snow is already a mess beneath carriage wheels and horses, despite the early hour. Hannibal does not turn for the inn, nor his own home. He heads, instead, to the far end of the docks.

The city he enjoys in the early hours, when industry has woken and people have not. It becomes a beast, then, kneeling over the water, growling its displeasure and shifting to make do. It's predictable, it's simple. People within just ants serving a purpose - Hannibal can relax around them.

This end of the docks is primarily Chinese, and he ducks into a teahouse, cramped and dark, but it serves a hot drink and a decent meal and it's all he needs for the moment. He needs to see about a shipment, but it's early yet. When the sun reaches the apex of the day, he will look then. Their contact will not be awake or coherent before then, he and Mason similar in that regard, and thankfully no other. From him, a name, from that name, the news.

As lucrative as it is secretive, this business.

Hannibal waits.

He thinks of Will.

No more tests administered, thankfully, since the initial torment. Mason seemingly content to have a new dog to tether with fear. Money has been invested, has been checked and adjusted accordingly and the proprietor left contented, deep within white coats and whiter powder.

When Hannibal had seen Will last, a week ago now, he'd been sleeping, curved over his table and breathing softly against the pages of a partially penned letter.

To my faithful friend it had read. And Hannibal had not read further.

The sun crests the dirty horizon and Hannibal watches. Content to wait in silence himself as around him the city awakens properly, more and more people within the teahouse, filling it as they do the den every night. He wonders if people remember how to be alone anymore, if any of them appreciate the moments, snatches, quick breaths of aloneness they get, if they get it.

He thinks of the way Will's skin feels against his fingertips as it trembles.

Hannibal leaves the teahouse just before noon and enters the main throng of the city, lost in the crowds immediately, as inconspicuous in his sack coat as any other man on his way to some business or another. His contact is awake, more accurately woken by the dumping of a bucket of water over him. He speaks fairly quickly after that, scared of Hannibal's reputation and his indifferent demeanor as he lights a cigarette and waits.

"Whitechapel," he says. "Easier to hide with all the commotion of before. No one cares, no one looks. No one bothers."

"And if I care to look?" Hannibal asks.

"Ten Bells."

Ten Bells it is.

The business itself is flourishing. There is not a night I have visited that has not been overwhelmed with customers, to the exclusion of those too late in arrival to find a seat. The sale of all manner of intoxicants both legal and otherwise is consistent and steady. Many of the clients are repeat - most, in fact - until such time as they are no longer able to afford the services offered therein. There appears to be no sale of human wares, however, a fact that differentiates this particular business from many of its competitors, and yet this does not seem to have dissuaded a steady throng of visitors. I have little detail of the specific locales from

which the goods themselves are procured, suffice to say that many of those in the employ of this establishment appear to be immigrants from Turkey. It is safe to say that this is the general source of wares, and I will endeavor to glean more specific names if possible.

The proprietor, however, is American, and I admit to being unfamiliar enough with dialects of the region to know more specifically from where he has come. He appears to be of substantial means well beyond that afforded by this particular business, which thus far I have seen to be treated more as a hobby than as a viable source of income, though it is undoubtedly enough to fill his coffers comfortably even still. His carriage and manner suggests one raised within the upper classes, to the point of conspicuity in a neighborhood that is well-known for its poverty and crime, and little else. He appears to live very comfortably despite the incongruity of his presence here.

His name is Mason, and I have not yet been entrusted with a surname.

“Verger?” the woman whistles, a soft sound between thin lips, before turning dark eyes to Hannibal again. “He doesn’t pay enough.”

“For a courier?”

“For that shit to be made. You think it comes like that? You think you just pick the damned flower and crush it into a pipe? Please.”

Hannibal can’t help but smile. If a word could be applied to this woman it would be fearless. Ferocious. He bets she could drink a whole group of men under a table, and has in the past. She is the kind of woman who would pull a full day’s work and exhaust someone in the quiet of their chambers just for herself after. He finds he already has a beautiful appreciation for her.

“You survived America,” he tells her. She snorts.

“Hannibal, I own America,” she corrects. “No one remembers, no one *thinks* of those that provide the drugs. We don’t matter. We’re not in the foreground, we’re not seen. But you take us away, for one day,” she snaps her fingers, sits back. “And that’s it. An addiction severed is not a pretty picture, Hannibal, you know that.”

He swallows, purses his lips.

He knows.

She regards him some more before sighing, taking off her hat to run fingers through long, jet-black hair that somehow always falls straight, always falls immaculate. Her Asian heritage. Hannibal thinks perhaps Korean, but she has never gifted him the information.

“Look, I have a shipment. I do. It’s here, and it’s good and I need it to go. But I won’t sell it to Verger.”

“If it’s a question of money -”

“It’s a question of moral integrity.”

Hannibal's smile is thin, tired.

"You make drugs."

"And he destroys lives before they've had a chance to *live*," she spits back. Hannibal regards her carefully before nodding, just once. A moment of silence more between them, before he stands, and with a sigh she reaches to catch his hand and still him.

"Half," she says. "Half of it, but not all."

Hannibal turns his hand to take hers, lift it to his lips and brush her knuckles with them gently. She remains unmoved, if not for the gentle wrinkling at the corners of her eyes.

"Get out."

Hannibal smiles, ducks his head in a bow, lets go of her hand.

"I'll have it at the docks by dusk. Usual place, usual guy. And Hannibal?" she pauses, brings her lip between her teeth before sighing to release it. "It's for you. Never for him."

"I know."

She hums, eyes narrowed again, before bringing her hair back into a tail, twisting it to fit once more under her hat. When she stands, she reaches for something on the seat beside her, hands the envelope to Hannibal.

For a long moment he just looks at it, turns it in his hand before pocketing it, pressed close to his chest where he can feel it when he moves.

"Dusk," he confirms.

She just swallows, casts her eyes down before turning to take up her heavy jacket and shoulder it.

"Get out," she repeats softly.

So Hannibal goes.

But you have asked me here not only for facts, easily garnered, I'm sure, from many who might find themselves available in your employ. I was asked to be here to provide my particular impressions of the place and the man in it. I have since discovered that perhaps it is not only for these reasons that I, in particular, was chosen for this.

I apologize in advance for what I must convey to you, the difficulty of that conveyance being the reason for my missive arriving several days later than anticipated. I trust as well that you are familiar enough with my professional history to know that I am not prone to hyperbole or excessive emotion when it comes to my work.

That said.

In my years of service, during which I have encountered a relentless parade of violence, carnality, cruelty, and other moral ills, there is nothing I have seen that can compare to Mason.

Beyond his provision of illicit substances to those who clearly suffer from their effects and his effortlessness in accepting what meager pittance they are able to scrape together for them, there is not a word for him that I would use in polite company. He is insane. There is not a stitch of reason or rational or humanity left in him that has not been torn asunder and resewn into a monstrosity that only just resembles a human being.

I understand, beyond my own skill in the field, why I was a candidate for this job - I am young, and have been called comely. You will understand my meaning as deliberate when I tell you that this is fitting, as he he prefers the company of children, and that his predilection towards unrestrained violence and savagery extends to them even more so than to those few older than the age of ten who happen to find themselves within his inner circle. I will not detail the specifics of these abuses, suffice to say that I have seen - with my own eyes - far worse than whatever you are imagining.

“I could come back.”

A wail and another grunt before Mason lets out a long breath that shifts the strangely untangled mop of hair from above his eyes.

“Talk.”

Hannibal keeps his eyes resolutely above Mason’s shifting shoulders.

“Half.”

“Half?”

“She had another buyer.”

A curse, and the little body shifts beneath Mason in a frantic struggle, before another agonized whimper wracks through it and it goes still a moment longer, flushed and eyes wide. But Hannibal can’t see that, he isn’t looking, he is looking up.

“Hannibal.” Matter-of-fact, voice just barely wavering with the effort as Mason stills, turns his head to look at him. “She should not *have* another buyer. There should be no one else.”

It is a discussion often had, and one Hannibal takes with merely a sigh and a tilt of his head.

“She said Jimmy would be at the docks. Usual time. We are well prepared for the weeks ahead, Mason, arrangements can be made.”

A laugh, then, sharp, and Mason stops for a moment to catch the little hands that struggle against him, twist in his grip. Small, so small, he can hold both wrists in his hand, caught behind the boy’s back, the way he’s bent...

“You. Don’t *do that*. Don’t scratch me again or I will take those little nails of yours one by one until you have none left and we don’t want that.” His tone is almost reasonable, were it not for the situation. Hannibal’s eyes remain impassively on his employer.

“You’re already bleeding everywhere, it’s so *messy*.” Mason ignores the little sob, holds the boy’s arms up almost straight, still, grasped in one hand hard enough to whiten the skin before he turns, again, to Hannibal.

“Arrangements can always be made. You always make them. But we *need her*. It would be so bad for business to take her out. The best product comes from her shipments. No, I *can’t* risk it, no arrangements. Keep her happy but keep her alive.”

Hannibal nods, finally allows his eyes to take in the boy shaking beneath Mason on the bed. He doesn’t look older than eight. He has seen him here before, given him treats of sweet fruits and shiny trinkets to keep. He knows his name is Can, a beautiful meaning behind it. It was one the boy had given himself. Now, one shoulder is darkening to a bruised, unhealthy color. Hannibal’s lips purse.

“You will dislocate it,” he informs Mason calmly. The younger man slowly turns his head to regard the struggling boy beneath him as though it’s the first time he’s seeing him. As though he isn’t buried so deep and pushing so hard that -

Hannibal swallows and looks away. “Don’t pull his arms up so high. If you wish to restrain him, hold his arms in front of him, over his head, not as you are.”

“You see how kind he’s being to you?” Mason asks the boy, though the other has eyes for Hannibal only, wide, brown, liquid and innocent. Terrified. “What did you do to earn that, hmm? You’ve been wailing and thrashing under me, you have not been a good boy at all.”

An exasperated sigh, and Mason drops the boy’s arms, letting him draw them to his chest with a sob. He raises an eyebrow at Hannibal.

“You’re too soft on the orphans, Hannibal.”

Hannibal says nothing else. He sets his jaw, top lip flicking in a brief semblance of a snarl before that passes with a languid blink.

“The shipment will be in at dusk. I will talk to Jimmy.”

“Do,” Mason sighs, arching his back and rolling his neck, one hand sliding down the boy’s bent back to grasp him against the back of the neck, pushing him further into the pillows.

“Close the door when you go.”

“Make him stop!” the boy whimpers, Turkish mangled from pain and tears but audible, “*Abi!*” and Hannibal cannot look at him, he cannot bring himself to look the poor doomed boy in the eyes.

“Just listen to what he says,” he promises softly, the language soothing, lilting. “He will be kind if you obey.”

Another wail then, childish and frightened and Hannibal turns before he can see the strike he hears instead. And another, and another, as Mason snarls his displeasure at the boy, demands to know what he said before he threatens to pull the tongue from his throat and it won't matter. Hannibal leaves him. Another poor, lost little boy among countless others. He closes the door.

I have earned Mason's trust, and for that I am glad. There is little that will see me stopped from persevering in his prosecution by whatever means of espionage I am able, if only so that I may sleep at night knowing there is one less beast on the streets. His trust came at the cost of injuries that left me several days disabled, and knowing the tests of loyalty that he has inflicted on others, I consider myself lucky.

On that note, if you will forgive me for being forthright - it is, after all, a particular quality for which I was chosen for this - it is unconscionable that the man asked to lay the groundwork preceding me has been here for so long. The cruelties that he has seen are beyond measure and it is impossible for them not to have taken an irreparable toll on an otherwise fine mind, dulling it by the necessity of survival beneath Mason's fist. Would that any particular good comes of my time here beyond being of assistance to you in scourging Mason from this city, I hope sincerely that it allows my precedent and partner a much needed leave, and compensation enough that he needs no longer expose himself to such horrors as this.

Outside, Hannibal takes a moment to light a cigarette, breaking two matches before he manages to hold one lit long enough for the tobacco to take.

The den is quiet during the day, though clients for the late afternoon have started to make their way there. Within, he had seen Metin running clean pipes back into the main area. The boy had asked him quietly if Can would help him that evening. Hannibal hadn't been able to answer him.

Perhaps Mason was right in that he was too soft on the orphans. Too gentle. Too kind. Not knowing a name did not make a person mean less, but it made it easier to create a distance between them. Hannibal brings a hand to his eyes and rubs, the sun seeming too bright in the late afternoon, even with no white snow to be seen, just sleet and the dirty gutter rivers.

And the darkness hides him, brings him to the warm place in his heart he so rarely unfurls, that he can feel tugged and pulled when Will reaches out to him, when he touches his hand to his hair, his temples, his cheek...

The sob drawn forth is harsh enough to make Hannibal shudder, teeth biting so hard against the filter he nearly tears it in two. He stumbles, back, two steps until his back hits a wall and curves his shoulders forward. Another sob. Another. And he has no right to tears, not with what he's done, not with what he's not prevented from happening. The boys he sees every day, the boys he doesn't rescue, the boys he doesn't *help*, those he can't even look in the eye when -

"Abi."

Hannibal startles, straightens. Takes the cigarette from between his teeth and ashes it. His eyes are dry but his chest hurts as though he'd been screaming, as though a heavy weight rests on it. He turns his gaze down to Metin at his side, barefoot in the freezing street.

Hannibal brings the cigarette to his lips again, fingers shaking, staring straight ahead.

"Abi, will you bring another pie?" He looks so hopeful, so little. Younger, perhaps, than Can was - is, still is, Hannibal can hear him - with nowhere to go. Nowhere to call home but this hell.

"Run along, *kumru*," he tells him softly, waiting, knowing the boy won't go, not yet, knowing that he has to stop this, this kindness to them is a cruelty. But still he turns and winks, and Metin grins, bright and childish, and bounces on the balls of his feet before running back to the den and leaving Hannibal alone.

He smokes the rest of the cigarette in silence, forcing himself to remain beneath the window of Mason's room, to listen.

He should stop to have hope of keeping his sanity.

But he cannot stop if he is to give the orphans any hope at all.

By dusk he finds Jimmy, negotiates on price and finds out what he can about the other buyers. Jimmy does not hide his detestation of Mason as Beverly hadn't.

"Eat something," Jimmy tells him, passing back the cigarette they are sharing. "You punish yourself enough."

Hannibal releases the smoke in his mouth in a gray cloud before sighing against it, watching it dissipate. He says nothing. Jimmy doesn't push. He takes the cigarette when it's passed back and taps it against his roughened fingertips absently.

"We could stop shipments," he says, "Dry him out. If he has no income, he has no livelihood here. He can dry out in his own debt."

"He will find others," Hannibal states, as he always does. To Jimmy. To Brian. To Beverly, when she has a moment of sentiment, allows herself to be a woman, there.

"If not him, then another, you know that. You *know* that, Jimmy."

A nod, a flick of the ash before the burnt-out filter follows it into the water.

Jimmy leaves him looking over the water as he takes the small boat back. Hannibal feels the letter against his chest and doesn't open it.

He stays long enough for the cold to send aches through his bones.

Then he returns to the inn and buries himself under smoke and laxity. He barely registers when he feels Will touch his face. Barely notices that he's throwing up until he feels the ice water soak into the knees of his pants as he's bent over outside.

He hopes that feeling will last, barely noticing, and knows he will wake up coherent.

I wait now for your response and further guidance. In the interim, I will continue to remain embedded alongside my beleaguered partner and carry what burden of his I may - in that, at least, I am grateful that you thought to pair us through this. More information will be provided you in further missives, much as I am able, for while we may have been brought into Mason's kennel, we are still merely his dogs.

Yours in trust,

W.G.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“‘Trust is a currency that men like you and I rarely spend’,” Will echoes, though it seems so long ago now, and Hannibal regards him from near the door.

“Spend it quickly and carefully,” the older man responds, and Will watches the way his cigarette hangs from his lips, every ash and twist of smoke illuminated in his addled focus, before he nods.

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: very dub-con, drug use, secrets revealed

I thank you for your letter.

I understand the difficulties you are facing. The papers have reported a harsh winter in London. Unforgiving and indifferent. It is the nature of nature itself to destroy indiscriminately. We encroach upon it, use it to our purpose, we take good and return filth. Such circumstances lead to inevitable desperation, to larger crowds within the dens - it is unsurprising the business is thriving for Mason and those like him.

Though if there is another of his ilk, I pray he is already in Hell.

Will muses, as the blossoms wind their way in pressed tin across the ceiling, that considering Hannibal as the Virgil to his Dante was not inaccurate.

It's quiet here, though he knows there is movement around him. A great deal of it, in fact, the den crowded with a crush of those eager to warm themselves away from the snow. A push and pull of bodies against the couch, against Will, fingers brushing his to tug the pipe from them and refill it with resin. The glow of little embers, lamps and lights, and shadows that pass between them, a question asked of him occasionally to which his tongue feels far too heavy to respond. And when the opium lacquers through his limbs like this - when the flowers move in plumes of smoke between his mouth and the ceiling - Will knows that this is only Limbo, the first stop on the nightly descent into the Inferno.

He has always seen things. Things people didn't want him to see, things he wasn't supposed to see. Truths and secrets buried but brought to light by a particular turn of phrase, a gesture, a mistake left behind that would unravel for him the entire story of its existence.

And though he knows he is here to work, to hear those missteps and to see those misdeeds, Will feels alarmingly little press to do so when the vapor first curls cool across his tongue, and makes him blind enough, deaf enough, to exist only with himself. Now and then he can extend, tendrils past his lips like fingers outstretched to the man who has taken to sharing the couch beside him, glasses glinting as he watches Will with an awareness that allows Will to watch no one but himself.

Blinking surprised when his fingers are taken in warm, rough hands and returned to him, Will turns his head against the arm of the couch, Hannibal's on the arm beside his, and only as Will shifts to tilt his face closer does Hannibal move away, slow as the smoke dispersed when he does.

It is a dream, here, but one that promises little in way of seeing hopes fulfilled, of warm memories or kind thoughts. A prelude, only, the meadow spread before the darkness of the woods in which monsters lurk, and whose presence he feels watching him in return when Hannibal tilts his eyes towards the ceiling, and reminds him that they have yet to truly begin their descent.

He is in debt, and he is, in his own position, desperate. He is suspicious, he is frightened, and such fear makes him entirely more dangerous. The Turks are a smart people, they will take their business elsewhere if he shows them fear, if his debt comes known. He will remain desperate to keep both sheltered and shielded to keep his business afloat, though he still will continue to seek to outsource from the Asians, Korea or Japan, you have told me he will not deal with China. Be wary, be patient. Be vigilant.

Mason's power lies in his ability to provide, to be the lynchpin. He cares little for the suffering he causes, and less still for the rumours that spread. Enough people keep his business lucrative, enough buy, enough, as you say, repeat their visits. Desperate times, my friend, are as much a cause for his success as his determination to spend his money wide and far. He has the mind of a businessman and a heart of stone to cement himself.

The dogs are given free reign, here, to move as they please. They have earned for the privilege, paid for in money and much more than that in blood, in pain, in the pull of poppy that begs at them both when they are too long removed from it.

They answer only to Mason, and answer they do, and the others know it is in their best interest not to ask after their business. And so no one stops them - no one notices, in fact - when they ascend the stairs to the office, and Mason is still in the back room below, deep in his cups.

“Trust is a currency that men like you and I rarely spend,” Will echoes, though it seems so long ago now, and Hannibal regards him from near the door.

“Spend it quickly and carefully,” the older man responds, and Will watches the way his cigarette hangs from his lips, every ash and twist of smoke illuminated in his addled focus, before he nods.

The notes are as scattered as the man who keeps them. At times they are entirely orderly - fastidious, precise ledgers of purchases made and provided, visitors seen and the dates on

which Mason saw fit to take their company. Will knows, even through the haze of smoke that already does not dull his sight into such comfortable numbness, that the greater truth lies not in cocaine-fueled carvings into pages, sometimes digging so deep that the words press through to the pages beneath, but rather in what lies deeper in his desk.

Scattered assortments of paper, names without exposition beyond a classification - "Chinese" - scrawled roughly when the drugs that once controlled his penmanship to neurotic perfection begin to shake him further still.

"He is meeting with them," Will murmurs, blinking wide, and Hannibal hums in quiet awareness from where he remains near enough the door to move, should footsteps creak upon it.

Other times an age accompanies the note - "10 years" - and the names are not known to Will as any of the boys who now work in Mason's employ. He wonders how long Mason has been here, cut off from the world into his own private palace of perversion, and how many have passed through the doors never to leave it again.

"He must be desperate," adds Will, more to himself in a shaken murmur, careful to replace each scrap where it was found, though Mason himself would certainly not notice. Paranoia is an unpredictable thing, and Will would prefer not to test it more than he already has. "He's trying to borrow money. This is new," sighs Will, the paperwork like the rings of a tree, like layers of history, the newer notes thrown onto the top of older ones and quickly forgotten. "But we've only just -"

"Will," cuts in Hannibal's voice, through the whirr of movement that links together names and dates, people and places, to form an image of what happens when the dogs are not at the doorstep. He sees it all too clearly, how neurotically Mason maintains his many appearances, and how precariously balanced it all really is. He's cruel, so much so that the word is a grievous understatement, but he is careful and he is cunning, and Will reaches for another receipt before Hannibal's voice sharpens against his skin.

"Will, now."

It pains me to say that no news that you have brought me pulls me to act swifter. I am aware of his proclivities, very aware of preferences and cruelties. The horrors you describe are known to me, the fear and lies in which rests his control is common. I regret that you must see them, I regret more your frustration in being unable to stop them but heed me when I tell you, you must not act until my word. His tests for trust are notoriously distasteful, your endurance of them is admirable. Be assured that I am grateful for your sacrifices. And accept my apologies for asking you to endure more yet.

With a blink, Will shoves the papers back into the desk, the ledgers back to where they rest open enough as if they were bait for those who might be foolish enough to touch them. He is seated in Mason's chair, and he knows that the man has been especially indulgent tonight, and that as the newest hound in Mason's pack, he is not allowed to touch his master's things.

Quick fingers snare the snuffbox closer from the edge of the desk, and without a further thought, Will brings a tiny spoonful of powder to his nose.

He takes it in with a breath and meets Mason's eyes as he does.

"Oh my," sighs the proprietor, ruffling deeper into his coat as he leans against the door across from where Hannibal stands smoking and unreadable. "When the master's away, the pups will play."

Will feels it like rain, an icy chill down his spine, as he assumes a gentled expression, mischievous, lips curving into a faint and devious little grin. His posture softens in Mason's presence, and in an instant he is years younger than moments before. Swiping a thumb coyly across his nose as the powder settles acrid into the back of his throat, Will lifts his chin and feels his cheeks burn.

"He would not be stopped," Hannibal intones, "and so I sought to ensure he did not snort the entire contents."

Hannibal is awarded a pat on the cheek, soft black leather, as Mason passes by him towards Will, whose hand happens to fall just so against his thigh.

"I'll forgive it this time. I'd rather him be awake for this anyway," answers Mason, approaching Will in lengthy strides, eyes black nearly black with the push of his pupils against the icy blue. "It's such a waste when they go all soft and accepting of it."

Swallowing hard, Will lifts his chin when Mason's fingers touch beneath it. His heart thunders, pulse fast enough that Will wants to move to still it, to stand or sit or walk or run to match the movement of it, and so when Mason catches him by the hair to jerk him to the floor, he goes readily and with a laugh.

His eyes turn to the flowers blooming across the ceiling when Mason settles into the chair instead and forces Will's mouth against the front of his trousers.

"I've had a very long day," Mason informs him. "Very tiring. It's time that someone else does some of the work around here, don't you agree? Unfair to expect me to just keep going and going and -"

Will's lips part on something between a cry and a moan when his head is shaken sharply, and he lifts his hands obediently to undo the buttons of Mason's pants.

He closes his eyes, and the next thing he remembers is the taste of Mason against the back of his throat instead of the drug. It is a welcome blur, a quiet found in the rush of blood in his ears that drowns out the man's chastisements and orders, followed as best as Will can and still not enough to stop a particularly brutal slap before he chokes on Mason yet again. The taste of blood on his tongue is enough to distract him from the heaving in his throat, the useless press of his hands against Mason's thighs to free himself enough to breathe, the heat of tears against his cheeks.

Will watches the flowers, and tries not to let himself think of Hannibal's gentle insistence that this experience would come on their terms, on their time. He tries not think of the way the man had held him close as they moved together. He tries not think of the fact that the Hannibal is there, and hopes only that he has turned his eyes away from this.

Mason delights in the sob that rends itself choked past Will's battered mouth when he thinks of it all, despite.

He does not do this for himself. He does it for the boys who suffer for Mason's sins.

He does not do this for himself. He does it for Hannibal whose being is ground to dust by being here.

He does not do this for his employer or whatever compensation they will award him for it. He does it so that one less monster preys upon the East End.

The thoughts provide little comfort when he is discarded to the floor with a laugh, and the taste of blood and semen on his tongue.

As to your partner, he is instrumental for this to proceed without incident. He cannot be removed despite your fear for his mind, for his sanity and his humanity. Do not incite notions within him to hesitate, do not incite ideas for him to stop. The operation rests entirely on your ability to cooperate and follow orders. Do not falter. Play the hound Mason thinks you are. To him you are nothing but. To this you are crucial. Your compensation will be your freedom, it will be well earned.

Hannibal's hand is warm against Will's back as the boy crouches in the alley, empty from the gales of snow that twist white like smoke through the streetlights, and retches onto the ground until there is nothing left inside of him. He draws a shaking hand along his lower lip, flinching when he does, and murmurs hoarse, "Better me than them."

He doesn't look towards Hannibal yet, preferring still to pretend he did not see, that he didn't watch as Will cried and ached and satisfied every nightmare need of the man for whom they work.

"Yes," Hannibal finally agrees, but Will doesn't need to see him to pick out the pain in his voice. He sets his jaw and turns his head away when Hannibal reaches to wipe the blood from his chin where his lip has opened again. "And better this than any number of other things he might have done."

The words are bitter as the wind that raises flurries around them, and in the billows of white, Will stands, lost, his senses shattered into too much awareness and too little, all at once.

"Will," Hannibal says softly, and to his voice, Will is pulled. "Come."

He follows. There is little more that he can think to do, now, whether at the behest of his employer, of Mason, of Hannibal who watches over him and even still can do nothing to stop this.

"I -" Will begins, and before he can stop it a sob shakes him, held back behind his hand and closed eyes, another swell of nausea acrid on his tongue but nothing left to give it. "Hannibal, I can't -"

“You can,” insists the man softly. “You can and you will. There is no one else that could. Come. I will bring you home.”

As he has so often, pulling Will from the depths of his own inner solace to remind him of their task. As he has so often, easing the pain inflicted on Mason’s new plaything with careful words and reminders of his worth. As he has so often, with a press of lips like the one shared now, alone in an alley, touched softly to Will’s hair before distance is put between them again.

Will does not do this for himself. He does this for him.

My friend, I cannot say more in this letter than what I have already penned. No words could soothe you in your ire, no words could excuse his cruelties and your agony in endurance. Rest assured, Hannibal, you have not been forgotten. You have not been forsaken.

I remain faithfully yours in trust,

Margot Verger

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

"How do you do this?" His voice sounds hoarse, lower, and finally filled with a lilt of expression, finally thawing back to Will Graham from the puppet, the mask that had existed within the den. "How do you do this, every day?"

Hannibal swallows, brings a hand higher still to splay gentle in Will's hair, caressing him there to wipe Mason from there, too - to erase him, replace that foul touch with something better.

"Because I must."

The split is inside only. Will can feel it when he tongues against it, leaning to light the paraffin lamp by the window. Behind him, Hannibal is quiet setting his coat aside, unwinding his scarf. They had not spoken much as he had walked Will home - he had not wished it and Hannibal hadn't pushed. The snow had fallen faster, softening their steps and covering their prints almost as soon as they had made them.

Will shivers, feeling as though he is radiating cold more than he is heat, when Hannibal's hands settle on his shoulders, slip gently down his arms to hook just against the insides of his elbows.

Still he says nothing, leans close enough to press his lips against the snow caught in Will's hair, to work gentle kisses down to his temple, cool against the corner of his eye, the curve of his cheekbone.

The streets are deceptively peaceful, banked in blankets of white piled too high, too quickly to be darkened yet by the soot of the city's streets, not yet trod into dirt by the footfalls that will come with morning. Empty streets and barren alleys, even the lowest driven into shelter from the snow.

Will closes his eyes, unable to make himself look upon the lie, knowing what filth waits beneath the fall.

Instead he tries to allow the warmth, the pressure of Hannibal to be felt against him. Hands heavy on Will's arms, lips soft against his skin, Will tilts his head a little towards Hannibal, just a half-turn as though to take a kiss from him, but not moving into it more than that bare allowance.

He still tastes cocaine in the back of his mouth, tastes Mason where his throat was rubbed and scraped into a raw discomfort. Tongue pressing against the cut again, he turns away, away

from Hannibal for the mere increment he had allowed in seeking his kiss. He knows the filth that would lie beneath Hannibal's kiss - like soot beneath the snow - and instead turns his body towards him, sinking into his arms.

Will says nothing. There is nothing to be said beyond a softly uttered apology.

For not being able to enjoy the gentle pleasure that Hannibal might have given him in that way, before Mason took it from them both. For letting himself feel weak after, as though his suffering had any measure compared to that which Hannibal has suffered daily for far longer than Will can fathom. For how wretched Will is to let be taken this first from Hannibal, who has already given so much.

Every bit as raw as his body feels, Will shivers from the cold that freezes solid the grime inside of him, and presses a kiss against Hannibal's neck instead, and the man's arms slide readily around him.

They stay together this way, pressed close, Hannibal's hands soothing up and down Will's back as the younger man shudders against him, presses against Hannibal and stays very still.

"Has he ever -"

"Does it matter?" Hannibal replies softly, hands coming to settle over Will's shoulders, cradling him there, warm, heavy, safe in the otherwise utterly quiet room. Against him, Will swallows.

"How do you do this?" His voice sounds hoarse, lower, and finally filled with a lilt of expression, finally thawing back to Will Graham from the puppet, the mask that had existed within the den. "How do you do this, every day?"

Hannibal swallows, brings a hand higher still to splay gentle in Will's hair, caressing him there to wipe Mason from there, too - to erase him, replace that foul touch with something better.

"Because I must."

"That's a why," Will responds, and Hannibal can feel the soft smile against his neck. He smiles back.

"Because I can," he offers instead.

It's the same answer Will would give, really. A shiver springs across limbs as Hannibal plays through his hair, and Will tilts his head enough to allow their mouths to come together, soft as snowfall.

Because if Will's question nor the answer matter, and for those who have no choice but to continue they assuredly do not, then perhaps what Will has undergone matters no more to Hannibal than if their roles were reversed. A comfortable nihilism, both in the gutter but at least together, aching to melt away the ice that would all too readily encase them both and instead seek the comfort of carelessness, found in a gasp when Hannibal's kiss seeks deeper.

"I want to feel only you," Will insists, pushing his fingers back through Hannibal's hair to curl tenderly. He is half-hard and half-not, halfway between a need for desperately deep sleep and a pounding pulse driving him onwards.

"Please," he breathes, hand splaying against Hannibal's cheek as he brings them to kiss again, directing him with his own body towards the bed. Big hands press into the uneven mattress, and as Will moves to spread his thighs across Hannibal's lap and sit astride him, he sees them reflected in gold from the little lamp against the window.

Brought into the light, if only for an instant.

Will presses his hands to Hannibal's shoulders, and despite the strength that he can feel twitch beneath his touch, the man lays back softly, and Will curls his fingertips against Hannibal's stomach, leaning low to kiss him again and again.

He's exhausted. They both are. A constant stress night after night with few hours to sleep during the day the more Mason calls on them both. Will doesn't know if Hannibal even sleeps anymore, smoking as he does every night, taking whatever Mason gives him. He can almost see the deterioration of the man beneath him and it tugs at his heart as though it was his body tearing away from its bones.

Hannibal slips his hands against Will's neck, down further to displace the jacket he wears still, until Will balances just on his knees on the bed, mouth to Hannibal's and pulls his arms free of the sleeves to let the jacket fall to the floor. Then to the buttons, one after the other, Hannibal's fingers deft and cool, until Will's chest is bared for him and he pulls the younger man close to kiss against it instead. Spine curved to half-sit half-lie, working his mouth warm against pale skin, moving his hand to accommodate Will's quick fingers to bare him as well, and skimming the backs of his fingers over the dusting of hair just above the waistband of his pants.

Hannibal thinks he's growing thinner.

It's a wonder that either of them are whole enough for this, but they are, somehow, alive again when they're together. Hearts that stay still for so much of the day when they're under siege now moving faster, a shiver of excitement rather than one of dread, when Will presses his palms flat against Hannibal's stomach, soft skin that's his alone to touch. His smile broadens a little in the kiss and his fingers seek further still, both hands pressed against Hannibal's length beneath him, his touch cold enough to draw a soft hiss before it warms against him.

This is familiar, by now, an exploration and a comfort both, to feel Hannibal so close to him, to experience him and enjoy his nearness. Will rubs his palms slowly down the man's hardening cock, a gentle touch, awkward in its newness for him still, pale cheeks turned florid and bright, lips parting between their languid kisses.

It is as easy to be lost together like this as it is in smoke, now, this room that they share, this time and this place, theirs alone. Simply two men whose affection runs deeper than either can give voice to speak its name.

"I'm glad you're with me," comes the soft murmur, between their mouths, as Will shifts to allow Hannibal room to slide lower his trousers, each shuffling back onto the bed in slow, smoldering movements, unwilling to let their kiss part for longer than a breath.

They shift, twist to lie on the bed properly, Hannibal divested of his clothing fully once he leans up to pull his arms from the sleeves of his shirt and discard it to the floor. A careful turn, enough not to displace either to the floor with their clothing, and Hannibal surges that little bit closer, leaving no space between them for anything but their hearts.

He wants him. As the weeks pass and the torment continues and Hannibal's letters come less frequently and those that he gets say only *stay your course*, Hannibal finds himself sinking into Will entirely; his devotion, his protection, his concentration - Will gets it all.

When the pipe isn't against his lips and the smoke within his very soul, he thinks of Will, he thinks of this and the softness that brings on the rush. A drug in himself, Will Graham, to him. He wants. He aches. The nights he sleeps he dreams of soft fingertips, the nights he walks he imagines Will beside him. An addiction as strong as anything Mason has controlled him with.

Certain days Hannibal no longer remembers his lover, the boy who had once held him in thrall so strongly he had thought nothing else would ever pull him. Now he thinks of Will and how if he said to run, he would run with him.

He feels Will wraps his legs around him, more confident in this, between them, now, one hand still down to stroke Hannibal enough to send him shuddering, pushing moans against Will's throat to stifle them.

"I want you," he tells him softly, nosing behind Will's ear before gently biting the lobe.

Will nearly laughs, clumsy fingers shoving his drawers down past his hips and off his feet, before he twists to settle beneath Hannibal's weight, the heaviness enough to still the pain in his mouth and throat, enough to slow his heart into a fond flutter. A warm rapport of shivers ricochets down the length of his back when Hannibal nips at his ear, and Will sighs against him, a sweet amusement.

"You have me. You, and no one else," he insists. It would sound childish, womanly, perhaps, were it not so entirely true. Without Hannibal, he is alone in this place, and Hannibal more so.

Will slides a bare arm over Hannibal's shoulders to bring them closer together even still. The other remains between them, and Will does, finally, laugh on an eager sigh when he joins them together in one hand as Hannibal so often does. Shared strokes and shared pulse, skin sliding softly against skin, as Will's leg rides higher up Hannibal's hip.

The sound that escapes Will when Hannibal rocks more firmly against him is somewhere between a whimper and a sigh, lilting high at the end of his breath when he arches gently beneath the man, head tilted back and neck bared as he breathes, grinning softly despite the twinge in his mouth, "And I want you, Hannibal. You, and no one else."

The sigh against him is harsh and Will feels the smile against his throat, feels it pressing closer with every pulse of his quickening heart.

This they have done before, Hannibal teaching Will what he enjoys with the constant reassurance of sighs and gentle sounds, hot kisses and languid shifts. They are gentle lessons, a beacon of relief amidst the storm of their lives. Hannibal wants to feel Will against him, around him, wants to drive that flush darker on his skin, the light brighter behind his eyes. He wants to hear Will's soft begging, for what he isn't sure. He wants to bring Will to the same, sweet completion that had him sighing *oh* against his shoulder, wrapped around Hannibal and pinned to the wall.

He wants to give him that.

But he knows today is not the time. Knows today Will still tastes pain on his tongue and feels powder in his lungs.

"Will you turn on your side for me?" he asks, voice catching a little as Will turns his wrist and they both freeze for a moment, caught in the shudders of pleasure.

He cannot take Will apart today. He will hold him together, another gentle lesson, instead.

Will swallows, nods. Reluctant to let go but curious, pliant with warmth. He settles on his side and smiles as Hannibal kisses down his neck and over his shoulder, stroking a warm palm over his arm before hotter lips follow. His mouth slips from Will's wrist to the curve of his hip.

He hooks a hand gently over Will's thigh, brings his other to slip beneath him, and lifts until Will is on his knees, shivering with leaving the warmth of the blankets, tensing with the familiar hated position he had not long ago been forced to hold. Hannibal kisses the base of his back.

"Please trust me," he whispers, waits for Will to nod, for his fingers to release the sheets between them, bunched and messy. Then he kisses lower still, familiar hands moving to guide Will to spread, before Hannibal licks against him, soft, barely felt, and hot.

Will isn't given time to protest before he feels Hannibal's tongue against him a second time, and goes so still, the room so soundless, that the only thing he can hear is the hammering of his own heart and the gentle clicking sound of Hannibal licking him again, and again.

If he could melt into the mattress, he would, with a long, low groan that draws so much air from his lungs that his back arches deep, stomach nearly pressed to the bed following his chest, and hips raising higher.

"Hannibal -"

A shudder, spiraling out from the pressure hot as coals in his belly, pushes Will's hands forward. He clutches the mattress and muffles another moan - this time as Hannibal sucks softly, rather than licking - and just as soon splays his fingers, pawing catlike, murmuring incoherent.

"Hannibal, I -"

Hannibal holds Will's thighs from sliding too far across the bed, a gentle pressure only to steady him, not to trap or ensnare. It is always this way with them, when they are themselves, Will knows, as another shortened breath startles past his lips. He asks if Will would move, he does not force him. He adjusts, he does not insist. He is gentle and patient and Will aches for him, like he has for no other in the world, from deep in his chest with a gentle whimper.

His protector, his partner. His friend.

"Please," Will sobs softly, and he knows not what it is he's begging for, and could hardly care. He wants everything, all that Hannibal will show him or share with him, all the promise that Will can let himself imagine in moments like these, when they are so far, it seems, from the danger that shouts daily for their blood.

"Please, Hannibal."

Another kiss, heavy and hot against Will's skin and he kisses down against the soft skin of his thighs, presses hot breath and warm tongue against them until Will voluntarily spreads for him. He can smell how aroused Will is, just there, heady and intoxicating and he *wants*, considers his patience against his need and weighs Will's safety more important, always, his trust and his comfort.

"On your side again," he whispers, lips still quick with short, hot kisses to his back, his ribs, up over to his shoulder once more as Will obeys, legs trembling and fingers scrabbling to catch Hannibal somehow. He allows him a hand to thread their fingers together and cling, letting Will tug his reassurance from him this way. It is beautiful and innocent and utterly perfect.

"Please."

"Yes," a sigh, a promise, a lesson gladly given.

Hannibal presses up against Will's back, close enough to feel the other's heart hammer through his ribs, wrapping their joined hands up against Will's chest to rest on his collarbone. With his free hand he guides himself to press between Will's slick thighs, swings a leg over Will's to hold them pressed further together and gasps as he rolls his hips against him, the feeling a delicious emulation of the intimacy he seeks and wants and craves with Will, an intimacy that he will beg of him another day.

Will's laugh is so startled, so soft that if the feel of his thighs warm and slippery around his length didn't draw Hannibal's breath short, that lilting little sound would. He tilts his head to watch, bringing the older man's hand up to press the back of it against his cheek, cool against the hot flush there. Another roll of hips brings Hannibal back between his legs again and Will sighs a shudder against Hannibal's fingers.

As another slow thrust rocks him forward, Will slips his free hand back to Hannibal's hip to rest against it, to feel the man move this way, because of Will. For Will.

It occurs to Will, as it does so often when there is another new moment shared with him, another first, that he still does not know the man's whole name. Only Hannibal, and that name, he breathes out again on a sigh.

He won't ask. He can't. They can hardly speak to each other at all for the risk endemic to all but the most polite conversation, too much to lose by sharing too much, intentional or otherwise. And so they cannot know each other, but in this way, as Will gasps again, they can open themselves to the other, brought so close and laid so bare as this.

It matters so much more than the act itself, and Will brings Hannibal's hand high against his cheek again to nestle against, allowing himself to be rocked against in this way. He bites down against his lower lip, and clenches down around his thighs, to squeeze Hannibal there between them.

A sigh, Will's name riding hot beside and the pace quickens, Hannibal curling his free hand beneath Will around to stroke him in time, to feel the gentle pulsing shudders of him tense and caught up in pleasure, now, not fear and pain.

Will twists beneath him and Hannibal makes a sound low in his chest and buries his face against Will's shoulder.

This. Just this. Can they not simply seek something so easy, without fear of retribution and being ostracized?

He curls his fist just under the head of Will's cock and twists gently, to feel the way Will's back shudders taut with pleasure, the way he rocks his hips back to feel Hannibal closer, to allow him closer in turn.

It is such a softly intimate thing, sharing breaths and heat and pleasure between them, no pain to mar this, a trust developed as gently and as gradually as everything with them.

Hannibal parts his lips and presses his teeth gently against Will's skin.

"Yes," breathes Will, eyes rolling closed. He laces his fingers with Hannibal's, palm to palm, intimacy to intimacy, to feel the man around him in as many ways as one could imagine.

To know, and to remind them both, that every part of them belongs to the other.

Will arches back, moaning beneath another clever turn of Hannibal's fingers, pulling strong and playful across his twitching cock, flushed and full, the skin slid back enough to reveal the glistening tip across which Hannibal swipes a thumb.

Whimpering, Will reaches between his legs and teases the tip of Hannibal's length when he rocks forward and it passes again between his skinny legs. Fingertips curl to brush against it each time he can, another soft laugh pressed to their joined hands. He feels weak and powerful all at once, lost to the roaming hands and heated mouth and loyal, fierce heart of the man who has him held so entirely, and the awareness that he, too, holds Hannibal as only his own.

He holds his thighs tight, squeezing them together when Hannibal thrusts between his legs, his entire body flushed hot from where that fire burns hottest in his belly. A hard swallow hitches his breath and Will leans back, head against Hannibal's shoulder, letting himself be moved, letting himself be claimed. He will take anything the man would give him, his trust entire and consuming, and Will licks his lower lip between his teeth to quiet the words that - like so many others - he knows he cannot, should not speak.

The thrusts grow more frantic, a hot, racing rhythm to bring them both to aching, perfect completion.

Will cums first, lips parted and sounds barely heard as he trembles, twitches, shivers against Hannibal's hand and Hannibal himself. He bends his knees, tugs Hannibal against him closer, more and more intimately, and finds himself feeding off of the giddy relief of Hannibal's release against him.

An endless cycle, pleasure feeding pleasure.

It takes a while for Hannibal's hand to ease the grip on Will's, for him to sigh, press a smile to Will's shoulder, his neck, up to his cheek. And a sound, so unusual and so private, a laugh that Will knows he is the first to hear in a long time.

Will is struck by the sound. Startled. And then relief, immediate, and a fiercer affection than Will has ever felt before, that Hannibal would share that laugh, intimate and serene, with him and no one else.

He turns, twisting beneath the tangle of blankets, only to settle again just as sated. Arms and legs wrap over Hannibal, twine through his, an interlocking knot to press as close as they are able. Bright-eyed still, alert and curious with the drug that ushers away any hope of sleep for him, Will brings his own fingers to his lips to taste Hannibal on them, to ensure that this is the last taste that settles on his tongue for the night, given and taken in shared need and desire, rather than forced upon him.

Amusement, brief, at the tingle of excitement across his lips, before he closes them against Hannibal's mouth, again and again.

He will see Hannibal gone from this place, removed by force if it is the only means. He will see him free of the weight that burdens the slump of his shoulders, that pushes any light from already darkened eyes.

"You have me," Will tells him in a whisper. "You have me."

Hannibal just holds him, hands up to stroke Will's hair and down over his face, memorizing the contours of him, the shape and feel of him. Fingertips over his brow, down his nose, aquiline and fitting, slipping to splay against the flush of his cheeks, turning his hands to stroke the backs of his fingers gentle over the skin there. Thumb down to trace Will's lips, avoiding the bruised and swollen bend to touch to the corners.

Then he kisses him. A deep, slow thing that relaxes Hannibal to laxity against the younger man.

He knows Will won't sleep, not for a long time, but he trusts that when he himself wakes, Will is going to be curled at his side again. For now he lets himself go, trusting enough to let Will watch over him, comfortable enough to feel the snare of sleep even as gentle fingers twine through his hair and run the ridges of his spine.

The boy will watch, alert even in exhaustion, awake even in the heady darkness, with every part of himself spread across the man at his side. He forces his hands as still as he can make them, to let Hannibal sleep, to insist on it, with gentle hushes when he stirs. Hours pass, each as quiet as the one before, and each as cherished, a constant discovery of a new little sound uttered from a dream, a particularly deep breath that moves Hannibal's ribs beneath Will's arm.

Sleep takes him unexpected, his head beneath Hannibal's chin and breath warm against his throat, as sudden as the snowfall gathered thick against the window, and every bit as welcome.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"Do not," Mason snaps, gloved finger pointed at Katz across the table. "Do not correct me." He smooths his coat back down and slouches back into his chair. "If I say I have the money, then I have the money. What I want," he says through his teeth, the consonants clicking hard in irritation, "what I want, what I *want*, Miss Katz, is what you have just described to me. A better product."

Of the countless reasons for which Hannibal can envision himself snapping Mason's neck, his laugh in this particular moment - like pistols firing in a too small space - ranks among the highest.

Will stands, as one is expected to do, and smooths a hand down the front of his coat before inclining his head, with a bare glance to Hannibal who does not pay him mind at this particular moment, watching Mason with a tangible disgust, apparent enough to Will and to no one else.

"This," Mason finally manages, lips pursing together, drawn between his teeth in an attempt to reign himself in. "Must be the illustrious - ah," he hesitates. Standing, he offers his hand, wrapped as ever in a black leather glove. "Well, I was going to call you Mister Katz, and I suppose that's not *entirely* inaccurate, but -"

Bev stares at him long enough for the presented hand to seem almost awkward, before taking it in a grip that seems to delight Mason more. They shake. She returns her hand to her pocket almost immediately, expression far from pleased.

"I am here only on Hannibal's word," she says, and Will notes she has no accent, perhaps a tilt at something *other* but she does not sound foreign, though her narrowed eyes and bone structure speak of places far beyond countries he can imagine.

"I see no reason why I should be here discussing a product I clearly don't want to sell you, Verger."

"Don't be so quick to say no," Mason warns, in jest, as much as such warnings are ever entirely made in jest. "Especially since I agree with you entirely."

He settles back into his chair and folds his arms around himself. There are drinks on the table, readily reached if she wishes, easily ignored if the breaking of bread - or brandy - isn't desired. Mason doesn't care one way or the other. Rather than concern himself with such mundanities he concerns himself with her, instead. She is as tall as he is, taller still when beneath the stiff beaver-felt topper she came in wearing. The tails on her coat are longer than

those on any of the men in the den, her striped vest vibrant and bright in shiny satin beneath it, stiff collar pressed so high beneath the proud jut of her chin that he isn't sure which is supporting which. Dark eyes and darker hair, swept back into a staid bun at the back of her head.

His eyes narrow.

Will recognizes the look immediately - Mason desires her. Not in a lurid way, not even in an envious way, despite her ostentation in showing up to a business meeting first as a woman, generally, and second as a woman in gratuitously expensive menswear. No, Mason wants her because he is intrigued. Perplexed. As though he were a naturalist discovering a new species, unable to resist the urge to capture it and drown it in ether for his own personal study.

He recognizes the look because it is the one that Mason gave him when he first saw Will sprawled across his couch.

Mason pours two glasses of whiskey. "I don't agree with you not wanting to sell to me," he says matter-of-factly, "although I agree that you feel that way, for now. And I agree with you on your former point."

Mason hands the whiskey across the table to her, glasses glinting in the low lights of the back room, a specter in eerie white across from her striking figure.

"You are here on Hannibal's word. Yes. And that is enough for me to trust, and to ask what it would take to change your mind on your other points." He waves his hand, a flippant dismissal of whatever her concerns might be, eyes bright and wide and curious as he cradles his glass in both hands, sipping the whiskey as though it were tea.

Fingers tap impatient but quiet against the glass, and it is set back to the table untouched before Bev speaks.

"We are both businesspeople, here, we both seek to optimize the consumption of a product we sell. And you cannot find fault with the product you get from me." A thin smile and a tilt of her head, and Will notes that the corners of Hannibal's eyes soften a little in a smile he does not express. "But I can and do find fault in your moral standing."

Again that laugh that sets Hannibal's teeth on edge, though he doesn't move beyond bringing a cigarette to his lips, languid like a cat as he stands just behind Beverly's chair. He had asked her to come. On Mason's insistence, but on Hannibal's the summons had been made by him. He knew Bev was due to sail out in two days, back to America, back to her goldmine of a market. She would not be back for over a year, travelling through the mainland and back to her country for more of the poppies themselves.

"My *moral standing*, Miss - Mister - Katz," Mason sighs through his teeth, "has nothing to do with my business acumen. Nor is it particularly up for discussion, although I," he laughs again, "I would certainly be curious to know what you've heard."

He brings the glass to his lips, fingers curling around it, thumbs pressed against the sides of it as though holding it in prayer.

Or, Will observes, as if holding someone's throat in strangulation.

"Rumors are nasty things, Miss Katz," Mason notes, finally, despite the arrogance of her carriage, no less her words. "Rumors cause injury between parties who hardly know the other. Cause riots. Cause wars. It's an ugly side of the business - I do accept that. But if I may, we are not here to discuss what you may have heard rattled through the mill about me."

He leans forward, as though to stand, and Will catches Mason's eyes as he does. A faint smile, melting as if it were a snowflake back into neutrality, stays the man from the bare shift forward. Mason's elbows settle against the table, his hands still braced around the glass.

"We are here to discuss what we *know* to be true, which is that you have what I want, and I have money enough to pay for it. So let us discuss," Mason declares, forcing a particularly broad smile, "like men."

A deep sigh and dark eyes rolling up to look at the ceiling.

"I am sick of men. There is no honor with men." Bev sits forward to mirror Mason's stance, just as tense, just as livid. A standoff between two dangerous animals allowed to roam together to see if they can coexist simply because they must.

The silence following is interrupted by Hannibal, walking past Bev's chair to stand behind Mason's. The loyal dog once more, cigarette already lit and now pulled from his lips to rest between the second knuckles of his first and middle fingers.

"There is little doubt of that, and yet you have supplied us before."

Bev's eyes flick to him, back to Mason again, before she relaxes her body and sits back, takes the glass offered, finally, and considers it.

"You had enough money to pay for it," she corrects, letting some of the amber liquid pass her lips without so much as a twitch at the taste. "I have many buyers, Mr. Verger, many people interested in a quality product prepared in a more exotic way to how things are done here. I go only where demand takes me and it is taking me from London."

A shrug then, small.

"You procure from the Turks, the supply from them is safe, the product usable, why risk their ire by buying elsewhere?"

Will listens without appearing to do so, a stillness settling into him that makes him feel unnoticed, a defense mechanism when one is surrounded by predators. Play dead, and hope you don't move too soon and catch their attention again.

But even still he listens - knows that Mason is desperately in need of money, from the coherent notes that he's found, from how quickly he asked to borrow more from Will after the initial buy-in was presumably long gone. He's seen the shift in tone from the men who work there, less employees and more occupiers, and he's seen Mason grow fiercer in his rages than when Will first arrived.

His mouth twinges as though in memory and he draws a long breath.

"Do not," Mason snaps, gloved finger pointed at Katz across the table. "Do not correct me." He smooths his coat back down and slouches back into his chair. "If I say I have the money, then I have the money. What I want," he says through his teeth, the consonants clicking hard in irritation, "what I want, what I *want*, Miss Katz, is what you have just described to me. A better product."

He snaps his fingers and holds a hand up towards Hannibal for a cigarette.

"Better product, Miss Katz, means a higher price. Higher price, *Miss Katz*, means a superior quality of clientele, to match the quality of your product. I win. You win. And you don't have to go through the trouble of leaving jolly old London to find buyers."

Will feels the curious look before he sees it cross Mason's features, and to his credit Mason manages a mostly conversational tone. "Where are you looking to go, that I could convince you away from?"

Bev's brows briefly furrow before her eyes flick to Hannibal. The other remains impassive, takes his time getting a small metal case from his inner pocket and flipping it open to take out a cigarette for Mason. He passes him a book of matches with it and shakes his head very slightly as Mason busies himself lighting up.

For a moment Bev considers standing, but she just swallows, lips moving as though to part before she purses them instead.

"You will not buy the bulk of product I need sold," she explains carefully, as one would to a child, though her tone remains the same as it was before. "You want your clientele, I want to keep my standard of living. I do not make a habit of becoming someone's personal chemist, I will not change that for you."

She sets her glass to the table again and clasps her hands together, eyes narrowed and dark.

"I will not have competition in my territory, and you will not buy what I need bought. We had a few transactions that proved beneficial to both parties, that time has passed. I will not be goaded, Mr. Verger, I will not be bribed, and I will not be convinced."

Will has to marvel at her nerve, not only in facing Mason down but in speaking to him in such a way. He wonders if Hannibal ever has. He wonders if anyone ever has and has lived until the morning. He catches Hannibal's eye as the other exhales smoke up towards the ceiling. Dark eyes meet his and the corner of Hannibal's mouth tilts before he returns his expression to neutrality. Will blinks, tries to suppress the flush he feels, and turns his attention back to the conversation.

"London is floundering in the trade," Bev is saying, tone suggesting she is repeating herself. "It has become a novel but less than lucrative business. So I am taking myself to America."

She sits back, takes up her glass and drinks the remainder of the contents down in one shot.

"I would suggest you move your enterprise similarly."

It's as though somewhere a glass shatters, but Will knows it's only in his own head when it happens. He blinks, the stark silence in the wake of Bev's words startling and sudden. A slow glance is turned first towards her, and then towards Mason.

The shattering was Mason's and the sound rings in Will's ears, even though all the glasses remain intact. There are echoes of the tension that just splintered into jagged edges - as Mason's shoulders curve a little, as his fingers roll along the whiskey he holds, as his eyes fill with fire when his glasses catch the light of the gaslamps.

"America."

Every syllable catches against his teeth, that suddenly seem too many, too large for his mouth, even as his grin splits to accommodate.

"Land of opportunity."

Hannibal's attention catches Will's again and Will jerks his head, a quick nod - to what, specifically, he doesn't know, but he can taste it in the air, acrid and metallic, a fear that rubs raw against the hinges of his jaw and settles there.

Fear, his own, and rage, not.

"You don't make a *habit* out of becoming someone's personal chemist," Mason repeats, pushing the glass of whiskey away from himself with both hands, sprawling forward across the table. "But you have, haven't you, at least this once. That doesn't make it a habit. That makes it a very specific and deliberate choice."

Pushing his chair back from the table, the legs dig into the wood with a shrill screech, and all but Hannibal flinch from it.

"Like telling me no," Mason considers, both hands leaning onto the table again as he barks a single note of laughter. "Like coming here and telling me no. Now, why would you make that very specific and deliberate choice, Miss Katz? You are, as you indicated, very in-demand."

With a long-suffering sigh, he presses his palms to his eyes and laughs again - louder, longer, somehow even less convincing of anything resembling a human emotion akin to mirth.

"I would tell you to tell her that I'm not coming, and I'm not giving up the den, and that she'll make up for all the times she turned around and bit me just as soon as I see her again. That's what she's done here, isn't it? And for no reason -"

Another sigh, shorter, but deeper - a huff that brings Will to stand, eyes on Hannibal for an instant before a movement from Bev catches his attention.

"I would you to tell her all of that, but maybe it's better to send a message in pieces. Yours, specifically."

Simultaneously, two things happen. Bev settles her heel against the rung of the chair and her fingers fumble for the weapon she holds concealed there, and Hannibal steps forward to press a palm hard against Mason's shoulder, enough to bend his wrist, to set his skin paling with the effort, though he seems to be putting none in at all.

What he whispers into Mason's ear, Will can only guess, but he watches Hannibal's lips move, watches the quick transaction of words before Mason shifts against him and Hannibal's top lip flickers in a snarl. Eyes ducked, lips moving quickly, and his free hand gestures slowly behind him, hidden from Mason's enraged eyes, towards Beverly.

Whatever she sees in the motion gives her pause, and after a moment has her settling back in a semblance of comfort, knife still sheathed against her leg.

Will watches fascinated, two languages communicated at once, between three people, and masterfully so. When Hannibal leans back from Mason the other looks livid, pale, and strangely *vulnerable*. Though with a blink that vanishes beneath the others.

"There is no honor amongst thieves," Bev intones, steely, expression entirely unimpressed, and when Hannibal turns to look at her, it is the first time Will reads genuine deep-set fear within him. "And there is no speaking against greed. It will not matter if I stay in London or I go. It will not matter if your den flourishes or suffocates on its own smoke. It will matter not at all because your greed is eating you alive. Your greed drove you to the Turks despite the treaty with Hong Kong. Your greed drove you to me from them, despite their firm stance and an honor code you cannot begin to comprehend."

She sits closer, and Will notes that Mason is entirely silent, entirely lucid, and that he has never seen him so furious.

"And your greed would have driven me from you, had I any inclination to stay."

She stands, and Will finds himself taking a step with her, not to hinder, but to shelter, instinctive, and Beverly casts a look over him before meeting Hannibal's eyes, blatantly ignoring Mason, now. She says nothing. He nothing in return. But then he blinks, a soft gesture, not dismissive so much as farewelling.

And Bev moves to walk away.

"Your concern," Mason declares, "is *not* my greed, Katz. It hasn't stopped you from selling to me in the past, has it?"

Will lifts a hand as though to stop her but she does without his need, pulling herself taller and straightening out the folds of her clothing. She remains by the door, her back to Mason, listening to him, but watching Will entirely.

He knows that the tension in her mouth, the thinning of her lips, is a concern caused by him, and not necessarily meant for him.

"Favors, for Hannibal," she responds. "Nothing more or less, and certainly no declaration of allegiance to you."

“Oh that’s,” laughs the man, “that’s abundantly clear.” He gestures with his hands, quick, unsteady things that twitch and move in explanation as though they were outside of his control.

“It’s obvious enough who’s been feeding those rumors to you. Blood is thicker than water, after all, and my own blood has apparently inclined you enough to come. To look. To see. To accuse and chastise, though I’ve done,” he laughs, disbelief, “I’ve done nothing wrong. And that same blood has inclined you enough to leave again with little more than a sip of whiskey.”

Will doesn’t catch the woman’s eye again when it settles on him, a confusion as if looking to Will for explanation. He shakes his head, as though simply clearing his hair from his eyes, and watches only Mason. Hanging on his every word, or so it would appear, as his mind scrambles to try and fit what he’s saying with anything that makes sense.

A futile endeavor if there ever was one.

“You’ve made your allegiances with hostile parties, and if you can do *me* a favor, I would very greatly appreciate a calm, reasonable discussion about what those parties intend for me, and what they intend for you.”

Bev does turn, then, dark eyes narrowed not in anger but genuine confusion. She says nothing, but Will is not looking at her, not looking at Mason. He watches Hannibal, and it is as though for a moment time ceases to matter. All he needs to know he can read from Hannibal.

And Will sees immediately that although Beverly is confused by Mason’s words, Hannibal is not. He knows exactly who Mason is afraid of, beneath his anger. But it is the fear within Hannibal that has Will breathless, has him feeling it wash over him like an oncoming tide.

A blink and time returns again, and Hannibal has shuttered that fear behind resignation, behind an acceptance so deep Will cannot fathom it. As such, he barely hears when Bev speaks again.

"What parties?"

“Now that *is* a tired old game,” Mason sighs, removing his glasses to press his fingers to the bridge of his nose, before throwing his arms out wide, a sudden enough movement to startle Will, and to bring Hannibal closer.

“Why would you,” he declares, “a very clever woman despite whatever eccentricities your kind might exhibit, why *would* you leave a city where you’re already established to set out for an entire new country without knowing you’d be secure?”

Mason circles to the side of the table, fingers pressed against it, and Will finds himself a step closer to Bev than he was before, although convinced that if this came to blows, she might still fare better than Will would.

"I don't need you to say her name - in fact, I'd prefer if you didn't! Reasonable doubt and so forth but what I do need, Miss Katz, what I *do* need is for you to give me a reason to let you walk out of here and tell her whatever sordid stories she's sent you here to dig up."

Without a word, Bev reaches back to open the door, the sound of the den suddenly flooding the back room with its sighs and the creaking of furniture supporting too many people upon it. She raises an eyebrow.

"I can as easily take my product back as leave it here," she says softly, no loud threats, entirely at odds with how Mason is treating the situation. "The Turks have no qualms returning something they did not make, it benefits them. So do not threaten me, Verger, with dismemberment, without first considering what it is you will be severing."

A pause, long enough to grow heavy, before Bev speaks again.

"And why would you, a *clever* man, assume I am not already established there?" It is a vicious swipe, and Will watches Hannibal step minutely closer to Mason in anticipation of holding him back.

"That is exactly what I assume," he chirps, his voice pitching higher as the tension grows frantic between them. "I assume that you are - actually - *well* established as the personal chemist of the particular personage who sent you here."

The information held and unknown between parties is as transparent to Will as the whiskey glasses they held in their hands - some with, some without - and the words press against him as if they were fingers touched to his cheek.

I am here only on Hannibal's word.

When she is gone - and for all of Mason's bluster, she will be allowed to go - there are only two left in the room with the man whose ire burns so hot that Will feels himself grow flushed for it. He doesn't know - truly, there has been no name mentioned that fits his accusations, and certainly no feminine name - but Hannibal does. And Hannibal brought Bev here. And Will can see the man broken beneath Mason's fist and the image, the sound of it yet to come, forces the shudder that snarls brutally inside of him into words.

"I believe Miss Katz wishes to leave," Will finally says, the words nearly inaudible for the tightness in his throat past which he tries to swallow. "She does not know of whom you speak."

The tension recoils as if it were the severing of a cord pulled taut, lashing back against Will who stands fast when Mason's sharpened gaze levels him. "Do you?"

"I do not," Will says quickly, hoping against all reason that the truth can be seen in his words, through the rage and through the drugs and through Mason's own broken-mirrored mind.

"And I do not need to, nor wish to. But she does not know any more than I, and I believe," Will swallows, avoiding Hannibal's gaze with everything in him, "I believe the meeting is at an end, Mr. Verger."

"Is it." A breath, an exhale of tension that instead grows to something much more frightening, a spark amidst dry straw. He can see a bare motion from Hannibal without having to lift his eyes, can feel the way his entire body is suddenly aware of itself, the way he has learned to control it doing so every hour of every day.

Mason's eyes linger before he blinks, a languid thing, and turns them away. Beverly doesn't shrink from the stare.

"Rethink your cleverness," she tells him quietly. "Your misdirected anger makes you stupid. I am owned by no one and my choices are always my own."

She blinks, turns her gaze to Hannibal.

"Do not contact me again." But there are words between her words that suggest fondness and not dismissal, that suggest familiarity and shared strife. When she turns to Will, she says nothing at all, but her lips quirk in a smile that is warm and grateful.

And then she's gone, the door closed behind her, and Will lets out a breath he realizes has held him dizzy.

"You let her leave."

Will shakes his head, eyes averted now to the floor just in front of him. A show of submission, of youth, of anything that might stay the man's hand just a little.

"She was leaving anyway," Will insists, the words hissing softly past his teeth.

With steady steps, Mason's feet occupy the space that Will watches.

"You *let* her *leave*."

He swallows hard, and closes his eyes. Better Mason think she left because of him than because Hannibal did not stop her. Better Mason lay the failure of the meeting at Will's feet than at Hannibal's.

Better Will pay the price than see it taken from Hannibal in pounds of flesh.

"I did," Will breathes, and the blow sends him to the floor.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Will turns his wrist, parts his lips to mirror Hannibal's and smiles. And he is so playful, so youthful here as nowhere else. Hannibal makes a sound, like a growl but softer, gentler, lulls Will closer to kiss him languid and slow before shifting, a quick motion to have Will on his back, pinned. His head bounces gently off the pillow and he coughs, suddenly colors behind his eyes, a hard floor and not pillows beneath his head when his head impacts again.

He's lost time again, a side-effect of the drugs he hadn't predicted, and Will doesn't know where he is. Why he isn't in bed. Why Hannibal is no longer touching him, why -

His mouth tastes like blood.

Chapter Notes

warning for this chapter: physical violence

Hannibal finds it utterly charming that Will's cheeks darken when he goes to undress him, still. Despite the weeks flowing to months now, together, despite how well Hannibal's lips now know the contours of Will's collarbones, the delicate curve of his stomach. And yet still the blush rises against Will's cheekbones, across his nose, brightening his eyes by doing nothing at all but bringing Will's expression entirely to life.

So Hannibal kisses him.

"On Wednesday," he clarifies, taking great pleasure in the shiver he draws from just his lips against Will's throat as his fingers slide the younger man's shirt from his shoulders, tickle down the backs of his arms before catching his wrists - inevitably wrapped around Hannibal's middle now - to work the buttons there.

"A business meeting that will not go well, but you know how he insists."

Will tucks his head against the curve of Hannibal's neck, shifting when the shirt falls untended to the floor, and spreading his hands across the span of Hannibal's back.

It is almost domestic, on nights like this. They take new routes to get there, sometimes meeting midway or at the boarding house itself, but they join together without a moment

longer than when the lock has latched closed. Discussion of business, first, in terms only specific enough to be understood - what the day held, or what the next may yield.

The words shed with their clothing, though, the trappings of the lives they're forced to lead left in favor of the one they would choose. A home, little it may be, but warm and safe, with no more or less than they need where their lips may meet laughing.

Belated - entirely too distracted by the feel of Hannibal's neck beneath his lips - Will replies softly, "Is there anything I should know in advance? To prepare for, to be aware? Or better to go in blind, do you think?"

Will's fingers work loose the man's suspenders, and find the fasten of his pants. He grins a little, another dizzy rush that floods his cheeks with scarlet and his sigh with a laugh.

"Always better to go in blind," Hannibal tells him, hands up to stroke Will's hair from his face with broad palms. It is advice he always gives Will, advice he knows that one day will save his life, and hopes, every day, that it will never have to.

He makes a soft sound as Will's hands press against him, smaller than his own, but always warm.

Everything else, Will has learned now, from other meetings, from interacting with Mason himself. Never interrupt the man, never tell him what to do, never imply that his choices are wrong. While Hannibal has the power to claim immunity from most of the man's violence, Will is still his favourite toy to manipulate.

Hannibal's shirt follows the suspenders. Will's pants slip to the floor with a whisper of fabric and the click of a belt buckle, and then it is Hannibal who finds his back to the mattress, his hands spreading to draw warm over the young man astride him, to catch the edges of the blankets still messy from the night before and pull them up against Will's bare frame to keep the cold away.

Will drags the blankets around his shoulders, shivering until he lays against Hannibal, chests and stomachs together, but Will's legs still spread wide. The blankets surround them both now, the safest place within their makeshift home, and body heat blooms between them.

He tucks his head beneath Hannibal's jaw and teases his throat with open-mouthed kisses, with teeth.

"Then I will be guileless and naive, bright and not-too-eager, and certainly not listen to every word that's uttered."

His hips turn and rock, down against the man who spreads strong and languid for him. Who ensures he is warm and fed, cared for and cared about. It is a lazy motion, unhurried, even when Will's hand runs between them to tease along the man's cock, heavy and firm.

"I missed you," Will whispers. It matters not a whit that they spent the day in the same room together, at times even conversing, but that was not his Hannibal, just as that Will was not himself. Only here they are themselves. Only here can they be honest.

"I'm glad we're home," sighs Will, seeking the comfort of Hannibal's kiss again.

It is no less dangerous for them now as when they started, no less reckless. Entirely unwise. Yet Hannibal can't not return the kiss pressed so gently to him, can't not arch up as Will's hand grows more confident in the touching, as he is warmed from the world around them to this, his Will, now, undeniably.

Outside, it's no longer snowing, London slowly moving to spring and coating the city in filth from the winter as sleet melts and gutters become rivers.

Hands find Will's hair, gently tug, pull, turn him to kiss against his jaw, under it, up to his cheek, his lips. Will is always so pliant against him, always makes the choice to be and most days it still drives Hannibal breathless to consider.

Will turns his wrist, parts his lips to mirror Hannibal's and smiles. And he is so playful, so youthful here as nowhere else. Hannibal makes a sound, like a growl but softer, gentler, lulls Will closer to kiss him languid and slow before shifting, a quick motion to have Will on his back, pinned. His head bounces gently off the pillow and he coughs, suddenly colors behind his eyes, a hard floor and not pillows beneath his head when his head impacts again.

He's lost time again, a side-effect of the drugs he hadn't predicted, and Will doesn't know where he is. Why he isn't in bed. Why Hannibal is no longer touching him, why -

His mouth tastes like blood, he can smell it. Blinking quickly he manages to grasp against the solid cold floor before he's kicked again and this cough drives from him painfully, dragging a moan with it.

"What gives you the right - the *nerve* - to decide when my meeting is over?" Mason barks over him. "To interfere in my business, and then *argue* with me..."

Every breath cuts through his body like the blade that once pierced Will's shoulder, sudden and tearing, and he presses his forehead to the ground. He pulls his arms against his sides, shaking as blood rushes hot against his chin. Somewhere, Hannibal's voice finds him, calls from seemingly far away.

"Please -" Will forces, ribs digging into lungs. He wants to find him, wants Hannibal to say his name again, and not the name of the man who laughs when Will's words reach his ears.

"And in front of a client. I don't keep you around for your business sense, and I've skinned boys alive for less than this."

Unkind fingers twine through his hair. The tug is hard enough to tear curls loose beneath it, to bend Will's back until his spine feels like it will break. Doesn't he know, Will wonders, how easily he bends for Hannibal, how beautifully? Doesn't he know he doesn't have to pull so hard, that a simple word will bring him to attention?

"Stay," seethes Mason, and Will can do nothing else with Hannibal atop him like this. Will sighs a soft laugh at the pressure of fingernails against his throat, of teeth that Hannibal grazes only softly against him, humming.

"I've no choice, really," the boy grins, an arm around Hannibal's middle, the other around his neck.

More and more these days Will wears Hannibal's marks, not Mason's. Sucked and bitten into his skin, beautiful blooms that range from purple to yellow, flushed pink around them all. More and more, Hannibal finds, he wears them more proudly, displays them for Hannibal to see, arches to have them darkened, splays his fingers atop them and presses down.

Now, Hannibal ducks his head to make another to mirror one from the week before still there against Will's collarbone. and the younger man shivers in pleasure, spreads his thighs around Hannibal, draws up his knees.

He is entirely irresistible like this, flushed and open and happy. Hannibal hums softly and pulls back to look at him.

"I suppose you always have a choice, but it's quite clear you've made it to obey."

"Easy question, simple answers," Will grins, and Hannibal surges up to kiss him again, a deep thing, lips parting Will's wide, tongue against his and surprisingly soft, for the depth of the kiss, the passion driving it. Hannibal hooks his hands against Will's thighs, up under the insides of his knees, and he pushes to spread Will further for him, arches his shoulders, rolls them forward as he moves his hips to rub their cocks together, languid, delicious friction.

"Moan for me." It's a gentle request, a soft one, whispered against Will's ear to be rewarded with compliance, and a shiver stills Hannibal against the other for a moment as he takes the sound in, how genuine, how soft, how utterly perfect.

Then he rocks against Will again.

And why could they not keep this? Will's thoughts always grow maddened when they're so near, when neither carries wounds inside or out from the day behind them, when it all feels so perfectly *normal*. There are, of course, a thousand reasons that this is not theirs to keep, but when Will runs his fingers up through Hannibal's hair, when he moans breathless against his ear and Hannibal sighs his name in return, he cannot imagine a world that would not allow them this.

Will gives Hannibal his moans, his sighs, his body, his heart - gives it all to Hannibal as often as he can in hopes the man will know that he is not alone, that he has something to call his own. A leg slips higher still from Hannibal's fingers, looping over Hannibal's waist with a heel against his hip to hold him close. Arching, Will shudders down the length of his body and snaps their hips together again, laughing when the friction between them makes him shiver.

And in turn Will is held by the man, an arm tucked beneath his back to press them together, fiercely strong to be able to hold Will so effortlessly, with so much eager movement between them both. He knows, knows in the warm new bruise that blossoms across his shoulder beneath Hannibal's mouth, in the way Hannibal says his name like he says no other word in the world, that he belongs.

“Hannibal,” Will decides suddenly, with his heart so full it feels like it’s tearing itself into pieces, bleeding warm through his chest. “Hannibal, I want you to -”

The man stills, and Will is not surprised to feel it. Until now, the things they’ve done - even cloistered safely away in their little sanctuary - have not been illegal. Immoral, yes, enough to be ostracized from decent society indefinitely, but nothing that would earn them the gaol.

Nothing that would earn them the noose.

And yet even still, Will can think of little more in this moment. They are safe here, they are alone in the world, and Will knows that it’s only by happenstance that Mason has not already forced a claim on his body in this way.

He would fight, if he tried, Will tells himself. He would not let him take this from -

“Hannibal,” Will chokes, breath hitching as he blood fills his mouth, chokes him to coughing against the floor. He is on his back but there is no warm arm beneath him, he is on his back but it is Mason who is over him.

"No!" A slap, so harsh it sets fire behind his eyes and Will coughs again, "Mason, *Ma-son*. Do not say his fucking name. You do not answer to him, you answer to me! You do not serve him, you *serve Me*."

Will shudders, sobs quietly through gritted teeth and hears Hannibal echo the name above him, softer, almost soothing, as though teaching Will the words like one would a child. He shakes his head and for a moment, there is warmth again.

Another strike, enough to turn Will almost entirely onto his side.

"You are not here to make decisions." Another slap. Another. "You are not here as a businessman. You are a *dog*. You are *my* dog. And you will *listen*."

"Mason!"

Will doesn’t think he has ever heard Hannibal’s voice so harsh. Then there is a fist to his stomach and he bucks, curls up before falling back against the floor, arching up, and it’s Hannibal’s lips against his throat again and he’s whispering soothing things.

Will squirms pleasantly, as Hannibal continues the gentle thrusting with his fingers. Two, and slick enough not to hurt, deep enough for Will to shiver.

"Relax," Hannibal whispers against him, follows the word with a kiss just behind Will’s ear, and Will grins, can feel the smile echoed in Hannibal’s words, can feel how the man himself is almost giddy with this. And it feels good.

A nod, bottom lip held between his teeth before Will eases that, too, and settles back with a long sigh. He feels himself relax and tense in turn as Hannibal works within him, a far stranger and far more pleasant sensation than Will had ever imagined, and merely the thought that Hannibal is inside of him is enough to tease a soft little sound from his lips.

Will doesn't let his thoughts stray - not to Newgate or Reading, not to the den or anything in it. He reigns them in and finds it not difficult at all to do so when Hannibal's fingers spread and twist, and curl in such a way - the man himself grinning against Will's neck - that renders Will unable to breathe for the gasp that he relinquishes at that feeling.

"I want you," Will sighs, back arching and hips turning, to press himself back against Hannibal's careful touch, to feel the tug and spread of himself around his fingers. "Only you."

He shifts a leg higher, to curl his thigh against Hannibal's hip and open himself further, arms sinking around Hannibal's neck in a gentle embrace. "Only you like this. None before, none after," he swears softly. Turning his nose against the man's cheek, he kisses seeking his mouth, and when he finds it he moans from the low, warmth flickering in the depths of his belly.

Hannibal adds a third finger and Will's back bends further, an arch Hannibal no longer has to support to keep, but he does regardless, pressing closer to feel the gentle trembling against him, the way Will opens up for his slow patient fingers, pliant and warm to his touch.

Hannibal considers turning him, bracing him on his knees to make it easier, but the way Will looks at him, eyes wide and dark and soft, he doesn't know if he can look away from him. He doesn't know if he can make it so impersonal, kinder as it would be. He doesn't know if he will ever experience this again, something so intimate, so gentle, so new to Will that Hannibal can guide him through.

He pulls his fingers free, kisses the corner of Will's mouth when he gasps with the sensation, and brings one hand to Will's to clasp them together, a shift enough to bend them both and set them softly just above Will's head, foreheads together, lips brushing close.

"Only you," he tells him softly.

He laughs against Hannibal's mouth when his hands are held in place, an entirely genuine sound that is nothing of the coy, unnatural thing that he occasionally forces from his throat in the den. It's tucked away into a little sigh, a kiss pressed softly, and another, small and nervous and flushed scarlet with excitement.

Fingers curling against Hannibal's hand, Will allows his arms to remain there, allows his legs to be hitched a little higher along Hannibal's sides, allows Hannibal to tilt his head with a fond nuzzle and to shift atop him and to move Will however he likes.

He is relinquished, entirely, malleable and content to this man, and does not ask - though the question rises in a moment of anticipation - for Hannibal to be gentle to him. Will knows he will, and despite who they become outside of this home, he knows Hannibal could be nothing but.

"I'm very," Will laughs again, just a sigh but amusement curling through the sound of it, as it bends through his limbs and brings his back higher again. "I'm very nervous, Hannibal, I haven't ever - that is, you know I haven't, but I truly thought I never would, I -"

A quick swallow, to rid himself of the words that always flutter forward in new moments like these, the smolder across his skin bright as a cardinal in the snow.

"I trust you."

Another kiss, soft, reassuring without saying anything, and Hannibal waits for Will to nod, a brief and rapid thing, before he bites his lip. He doesn't make false promises, he says nothing. But he can feel Will respond to the way his lips press to skin, the way he settles over him entirely, a comfortable weight, and Will exhales slowly and hot against Hannibal's cheek.

He does not rush this, has no reason to, and when he guides himself in, his eyes are up to watch Will, unerring, unmoving, to see the way his lips part on a silent sound, the way his eyes widen the further Hannibal pushes. He stops as soon as Will's brows shift, a bare gesture of pain, and Hannibal kisses him.

"It's okay." A sigh, soft, a promise more than anything, a plea to not stop, so Hannibal doesn't. He kisses Will again and pushes further.⁸

There is pain now, the gentle pluck of it in the sound that Will makes, but he draws a hand free from beneath Hannibal's grip to span along the man's back. The sensation is shocking, in truth, a stretch so unfamiliar and intense that Will feels as though he'll split all the way up to his spine. He doesn't stop the man, though his breath hitches a little as he feels Hannibal entirely inside his body, a fullness that makes it hard to breathe until he hears the familiar murmur against his ear.

"Breathe, Will."

And so he does, all at once, a gust of air that he didn't realize he was holding, and his trembling hand rubs long lines against Hannibal's back, even still trying to be a comfort to him, to assure him, to let himself be felt.

Hannibal scarcely moves again and it's enough to rend a low moan from the younger man, enough that he bites his lip to quiet himself in awareness that they may yet be overheard. His eyes flutter closed as Hannibal shifts himself back just as slow as he entered, and Will's groan breaks into another laugh.

"Oh, my."

Hannibal's laugh is just as soft, just as gentle against Will's cheek as he moves, first slowly, then barely faster when the stretch doesn't feel quite as cruel for Will. He relishes the fingers against his back, he relishes the gentle trembling spasms that run through Will's thighs.

"You feel very good," he whispers, a pleased reassurance that's met with a darker flush, a wider smile, before Hannibal shifts and Will swallows whatever he was going to say back.

Hannibal moves closer, settles his free hand curved just over Will's head and ducks to rest their foreheads together, sharing breath, sharing the soft little sounds that Will wishes to give him, parting his lips to languid kisses and playful bites. And then he turns his hips, just

enough, just a little, and stills, a series of shallow thrusts that set Will scrabbling against his back, nails leaving marks, thighs pressing tighter around him.

And Hannibal groans in pleasure, feeding Will the sound of his own name spoken almost in worship when he cries out.

"Hell," Will swears, slipping his fingers to twine through Hannibal's where they remained joined against the bed. He parts his lips again with his tongue, breath pushed from him with every little thrust, moved by Hannibal's body that surrounds his and presses inside of him, moved by Hannibal's heart that beats so steady against his chest.

He brings his arm around Hannibal's neck and curls his fingers through the man's hair, to keep their faces near the other, to allow him to steal small quick kisses when he's able enough to breathe.

"Don't make me," pleads the younger man. "Don't make me finish yet. Please, I want this to last, I want this to - *oh* - never stop, Hannibal."

His grin mirrors that of Hannibal above him, lips parting as he presses his cheek against Hannibal's own. "I want you," he murmurs. His words are punctuated by hitches of breath, by a bend of pleasure that pulls his body tight around Hannibal. "I need you."

"Oh, God," Will sighs shaking, and his kisses are clumsy as he whispers, "I love you."

The words send a shiver that is almost violent through Hannibal and he moves enough to bite gently against Will's shoulder once more, just pressing his teeth there, to ground himself, to ground them both. He speeds the motion of his hips but grants Will the mercy he pleads of him, does not torment the spot within him that sends his back into a bow, his breath sighing out of him in quick frantic pleas.

He is so beautiful this way.

"My Will." Another kiss, one to his cheek, just beneath his eye, and Hannibal slides his free hand down to coax Will's legs wider once more, moves his knee to bend further, opens the young man for himself, to look at him, to *see*.

His fingers curl with Will's, squeeze tighter as he teases further, brings Will to panting against him, to whimpering his sweet words before releasing him to laxity again.

The toying continues, enough to have Hannibal breathless and flushed as Will is, so close himself and wanting, needing, aching, to bring Will to completion first, with this alone.

Will holds out, turning his hips to hear the breath that Hannibal draws through his teeth, squeezing his legs together to bring that breath back out as a moan. He holds out for as long as his body can, until he is shaking, both arms wrapped around Hannibal's neck now, and face buried against him.

He finishes with a little cry, as though startled by the sudden release that heaves through him and yanks through Will's body like a cord unfurling. Fingers clutch against broad shoulders,

his breath hitches as though in a sob, and still, at the end, lifts into a note that could almost be a laugh.

His whole body is warm, legs shaking and breath made ragged, and Will turns his lips to Hannibal's temple and kisses him.

"Will you," Will begs softly, so breathless that he's dizzy from the exertion of it, from the feel of Hannibal filling him again and again, overwhelmed and delighted and with a pulse so quick it feels like it's nearly boiling beneath his skin - his release found, but feeling the shudders of Hannibal's teetering just on the edge just as acutely as his own. "In me, Hannibal - will you?"

A word, two, something soft and lilting in a language Will has heard from Hannibal only in his softest moments, together in bed with the rain and snow and hell outside, in his sleep, whispered against Will when the younger man bucked and whimpered his pleasure, and Hannibal finds his release, pushing deeper into Will, holding him close as his body trembles, as his hands squeeze tight around Will, around the sheets beneath him.

For a moment more they are still, for a few breaths panted against damp skin, soft fingers in tangled hair, lips spread on smiles and lungs filled with happy sighs.

Hannibal arches, like a cat in the sun, and presses his lips to Will's as he pulls out, soothes the younger man with a hush at the sting and emptiness of it. He settles Will's legs to lie comfortably again, keeps his own body blanketing the one beneath him for no other reason than to be so close, so intimate, with the one person he wants to be.

He will tell him, he thinks, when he has breath enough, what the foreign words mumbled against Will's chest mean, in the early mornings and late at night, when the man lies sleep-warmed and plaint against him with a blissful smile on his face, still half in dreams and half in London.

He wonders if he has to.

Instead he just nuzzles, soft, playful.

"Will," he murmurs, catches the man's eyes. "Will, wake up."

A frown for that and Hannibal's hands grip tighter to Will's shoulder as he shakes him. "Wake up Will, goddamn you."

A groan, soft, another cough, and more blood than Hannibal knows there should be when Will spits it to the floor, tries to curl in on himself with a whimper and a sob. He can hear Mason fuming behind him, pacing, steps harsh against the wooden floor, but his attention is on the younger man.

"Will, you have to sit up."

"Does it matter?" Mason's voice is pitchy, hysterical, "*Does it matter if he gets up? Really, what does it matter to me? He's not worth his damned investment, I could have gotten so*

much more without this added stress, Hannibal, so much more personal enjoyment and you stopped it.” A hiss, Mason bends, head tilted to look at Hannibal, ignoring the boy at his feet struggling to breathe.

“You took my valve away and now the engine’s broken. That’s on you.” A finger pointed harsh in Hannibal’s face before the other steps away. “Get him out of here, I can’t stand the sight of him right now.”

This, Hannibal obeys without a word, without argument. Hides the way his hands shake as he pulls Will to stand, as he supports him while the younger man seeks out almost blindly with bloodied hands to gain his balance. He pulls open the door.

“Go,” he whispers, words soft against Will’s ear, hiding it under semblance of manhandling the boy out the door. “Go, get out and don’t come back again. Sod the assignment, Will, you run.”

Will digs his heels into the ground with as much strength as he can muster when he’s pushed through the doorway, nearly stumbling as he turns back towards Hannibal. Desperate fingers clutch the man’s shirt, his eyes gone wide with pain, with panic, with the weight of the words that feel so much like the kicks that sunk into his ribs mere moments before.

"Come," Will hisses, adamant, furious. "Come - we'll go - "

"No."

The word is a savage snarl but hardly has time to twist past his lips before Will slings his arms around the man and crushes their mouths together. The agony in his bones, the rush of blood like thunder in his ears drowns out the sound of Mason’s laughter, cacophonous and cruel, that only grows as Hannibal snares Will’s arms and pushes him away.

"Hannibal!" Will shouts as he stumbles, watching wild-eyed as Hannibal steps back into the room, unreadable. Something is broken inside, many things, but none of it stops Will from hurling himself back towards the man and finding only the door beneath his fists, slammed closed and locked.

He bangs against it, frantic, until he is dragged out fighting.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

"He'll be back for you. For *Hannibal*." Mason stands toe to toe with his dog, and lifts a bruised hand to his face. There is a perverse gentleness to the way he wipes his thumb across Hannibal's mouth, pushes his lips out of shape and smears the blood from them, before bringing it to his own mouth to taste.

"Have you been playing with my puppy, Hannibal?"

Hannibal can feel the way the door shifts, heavy strikes driven by adrenaline, by panic - the boy would not have the strength otherwise, he wonders if he will even make it home and stifles the fear that he won't.

He keeps his hands flat against the door until he hears Will's struggling move further into the den, hears his name called again and again until Will is outside and all he hears is the agonized cry of the boy being thrown to the cobblestones. Only then does he push himself to stand, and run the back of his hand over his lips where Will's blood smeared in his fervor.

He says nothing as he pulls a cigarette case from his pocket, a cigarette from within and sets it against his lips. It takes him only one strike to light up, and looks up at Mason, brow raised, lungs filled with smoke.

"He'll come back," he tells him, voice entirely emotionless, deadened, softened by smoke.

"I wasn't done speaking with him, Hannibal," intones Mason softly, his raging boil lowered now to a simmer, but no less likely to scald. He only looks away from the man when he stretches his hand, a blink as though surprised by the sensation of pain or anything near it, flexing his fingers in the black leather glove, shiny with blood.

He holds his hand extended for a moment, as though wary of getting the stuff on himself, as though there isn't blood already drying dark against his smoking jacket, and finally removes both gloves, tossing them to the floor with a wet slap.

"But he will be back," the younger man agrees. He drums his fingers against the table as he circles it, towards Hannibal, sinuous snake-like movements as he turns his head to the side a little, watching. Judging. Sifting broken-minded through the information he has compared to that which already his gut sends klaxons blaring about.

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"Have you been playing with my puppy, Hannibal?"

A hum, displeased, and Hannibal sets his cigarette between his lips again around the intrusion into his space. He doesn't look to the floor smeared similarly in Will's blood, he just blinks, blows smoke out of the corner of his mouth, mindful of Mason's displeasure.

"The folly of youth," he explains around the filter, before he removes it and ashes it to the floor. "A childish infatuation I didn't deem necessary to discourage." A small smile then, stiff enough to force down the nausea Hannibal feels at the deception. "You do know what I like, and you weren't using him."

Mason watches Hannibal's mouth form the words. Hears them, ostensibly. Processes them. And ruffles deeper into his coat with a shiver, pulling it tightly around himself as though to gird against the chill threat that he feels rising from every shadowed corner around him.

"And you?" Mason continues. "I do know what you like, I do. And I do know that you can get *soft*. With that boy you used to have come around. With the orphans."

There is no less heat to the man, and it roils when he is forced to step around the splatters of blood dark as oil on the floorboards. "Will someone clean this up? I'm not running a goddamn flophouse here."

He drops into his chair, knee braced against the edge of the table, and pushes himself back into a lean. Nervous gestures, quick and agitated and ready to snap if not, perhaps, for the resolute calm of Hannibal in front of him.

"Have you gone soft on me again, Hannibal? Or have you been making good use of your time?" Mason grates, his tone cloying. "Why did he let her go? I wonder. I wonder intensely."

Hannibal shrugs, a huff of smoke through his nose on an exhale before he takes a step from the door, deliberately over the blood, and finally lowers himself into a chair across from Mason.

"Pity, perhaps," he suggests. "The boy has a soft heart, easily swayed."

"No. There was something -" Mason gestures, flexes his bruised hand with a wince before bringing it to his lips to tap against them, a quick rhythm, unsteady. "Something *deliberate* about that. He wanted her gone before she could say anything else."

Hannibal brings his cigarette to his lips impassively and takes another slow drag. The exhale is just as indifferent before he flicks the filter.

"I've kept him too occupied to be doing espionage, Mason, some days he can barely walk."

A snap of laughter at this, and Mason claps his hands together only to flinch again, teeth gritted in a surge of anger, of disbelief that this part of his body would do anything so insolent as *hurt*.

"There was no reason for her to be here," Mason considers, prodding at his swollen knuckles, the split skin across them, as though he were a child who had found a particularly interesting insect. "You got her here, but she's known you for years, Hannibal, years and years, and she's always refused *me* and my *hospitality*."

He twitches, eyes snapping to Hannibal when his attention is caught by the man bringing his cigarette to his lips, and Mason frowns before looking back at his injuries.

"Now, suddenly, out of the blue she listens to you. Decides to show up and finally meet with me, on the cusp of her dramatic exit to America," Mason spits the word. "Just to say hello. And isn't it funny that she had no such plans before this boy arrives out of the blue? Isn't it *funny*, Hannibal, that he would be so quick to make sure she leaves here alive?"

Mason coils his fingers into a fist and grits his teeth as the skin splits fresh again.

"I don't think it's very funny at all. I should have wrenched the boy's neck as soon as I smelled her on him."

Hannibal allows the man to rant, taking his time with his cigarette, buying time for himself with slow drags and dry swallows. Mason has always wished Will harm, simply to see the boy bleed. Had he been but a few years younger, Hannibal's words would not have saved Will an agonizing fate.

He wonders if he still can.

He wonders if he will have to merely settle on knowing Will is alive - and he will have him leave alive - at the end of all this.

"You're jumping to conclusions because you're angry," he tells him at length, putting the cigarette out between his fingers before setting it to the table and rubbing the ash from his fingertips.

"Beverly is my loss, my mistake. I had hoped years would mean more. But people are fickle. But the boy," Hannibal shakes his head, frowns, leans forward and settles his hands together on the table. "He has not yet outlived his usefulness."

"But the boy," Mason chimes, echoing, eyes rolling towards the ceiling. He remembers his hand before bringing it against the table, and drops his feet to the floor instead, letting the chair hit the ground with a clatter.

He leans towards Hannibal, elbows braced against the table. His gaze is terrifyingly lucid when it meets Hannibal's own, adrenaline burning through the drugs left in his system.

"And what usefulness is that, exactly? Usefulness to you, in sodomizing him until your pervert's heart is content?" he asks, and though his words are as ever laid with insult, he does not direct it as blows towards Hannibal, not when he shakes his head and points a finger at the man, almost good-natured.

"Or do you mean usefulness to me? I'm going to assume that's what you mean, because I couldn't care less about how you choose to spend your free time. What usefulness, Hannibal?" The words click tense against Mason's teeth, and he works his fingers through his hair, leaving it wild as the look in his eyes. "You sound as if you know something you're not telling me."

"I know only what you do," Hannibal assures him, and his tone seems to pacify at least that part of Mason's psychosis for the moment. "He is rich, he is reckless. That mouth of his is sin incarnate."

The last he adds without a single change to his expression, a single tic to suggest displeasure or amusement, though the words taste like filth in his mouth.

"Consider his usefulness to you on a linear scale." Hannibal sets his finger to the table, draws a slow straight line, "as it stands he runs his money as fast as his mouth. The business thrives with his investment. The business *thrives*."

A pause, a deliberate tilt of his head to catch Mason's eyes over the rims of Hannibal's glasses.

"Should he prove ignorant, the money remains, the line goes on." His finger stops, he folds it to set his knuckle to the wood instead, watching Mason's eyes flick down to see. "Should he prove to be who you think he is, you have leverage. Information. The business continues to thrive."

He draws his finger further along.

"But you kill him?" his finger slides from the table entirely and Hannibal clasps his hands again. "You lose your chance for information. You lose your money. Heed me. Do not kill him."

A stillness settles over the younger man, as terrifying as his uproars, perhaps moreso. Mason purses his lips together in thought, attention lingering where Hannibal's fingers marked a line across the table between them. He folds his arms tighter across himself, an almost childlike petulance over the discomfort in doing so, his body wired tight still from the exertion that was required of him.

"You're certain he'll return."

Hannibal parts his lips with the tip of his tongue, ignoring the taste of blood that lies fresh beneath the smoke.

"As certain as I've ever been."

Mason's brow lifts, a little surprise at such an adamant declaration from the man who is normally so careful with his assurances.

"Then he won't leave again until we know. How enamored is he, Hannibal?" The younger man's mind is working, fingers pressed against his lips in thought, eyes narrowed but focused

only distantly. "Of the pipe. Of the powder."

A grin splits his mouth wide.

"Of you."

Hannibal thinks of the way it had felt when Will had thrown himself at the door, the way he had felt the distinct scraping of nails as he was prepared to claw his way through it to Hannibal. He thinks of the way Will had stepped forward, diverted all blame, diverted all attention, the way he hadn't fought back. He thinks of how hard it had been not to twist Mason's neck when he'd pulled him off the boy, nearly unconscious from pain.

He shrugs.

"An addict to all three just the same," he dismisses. "Enough so that he will return, I will not have to seek him."

"And does he cry out your name as loudly as he did for me, begging you for more? Like a lover, Hannibal, it gave me *chills*," Mason muses. "I'm only jealous you got to him before I did. I've been so goddamn *busy*."

The man stands, nearly knocking his chair over behind him in doing so, and twists his neck from side to side, shoulders rolling to work out the kinks with another long-suffering sigh.

"We'll make it through this. Our temporary situation here, we'll be able to pay the Turks off just fine and all of this will seem like just a bad dream. Everything back to normal, won't it be *nice* after all this stress?"

He skirts around the blood again with a narrow look towards it, and settles on the table beside Hannibal, legs swinging as he motions for a cigarette.

"And once all this is cleared up, I'll have time to see what all the fuss is about with that boy of yours. *After* this is all cleared up, as you seem very assured it will be."

"I'm adamant it will be," Hannibal corrects him, setting two cigarettes between his lips and lighting both before passing one to Mason. Then he settles back in the chair, looks up. He doesn't answer him regarding Will's voice, he doesn't consider it beyond the soft memories that play in his mind of the young man arching up in bed, of the way his hand had felt against Hannibal's shoulders when he'd cum, how he had laughed so softly, so sweetly, at just feeling so free and so good and being able to share that.

He will not taint those memories with thoughts of Will's tears, with thoughts of him reaching out from the upstairs bed, bloody as he had been here, sobbing in pain, calling Hannibal's name, just -

"Hannibal."

Each syllable is deliberate, slow, a frustrating habit Mason has of getting attention back to himself. Hannibal blinks and licks his lips.

"The Turks need just the bare minimum to cover the indiscretion," Hannibal replies, automatic, too used to keeping one ear on Mason's ranting while his mind drifts and rests. "What we gave Beverly, perhaps a thousand more for reassurance. In the meantime cut her product with theirs, make it last longer."

"That's not," Mason snaps, and stops just as quickly. He forces himself to take and release a very long breath, presses the cigarette to his mouth and then does so again. So settled, he holds both hands out, a facsimile of patience as he starts again, marginally more gentle.

"That's not what I was talking about, Hannibal. We're good for the money. The three of us. We're good for the money. Pay them whatever you need. I don't care - really, I don't - and I don't want to talk about the money. Hannibal, I *don't*."

He meets Hannibal's impassive gaze and holds it for a beat or two longer than strictly necessary before turning his attention back towards his cigarette.

"What I want to talk about, is clearing the air - not with the fucking *Turks*, Hannibal - but clearing the air with us. With that boy. With *her*."

Mason ashes onto the floor and crosses his legs, one arm tucked across his middle, and cigarette held aloft. "He'll return, as you adamantly insist, and he won't leave until I am adamant that he's not working for her. Do you understand?"

There is an edge here, a hidden blade that whispers softly in the undercurrent of his voice, illuminated by a plume of smoke. "I need to know you're not going to go soft on me, Hannibal, although it sounds like you've been pretty hard with him already," Mason grins faintly, amused by himself, but it does nothing to shadow the glint of a sharpened edge in his words. "I need you on board for this. If there's any chance that he's been here and been reporting back to her, we're going to need to send a very strong message."

"Will that message be in the form of his eyes?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head. "Or his ears?"

He lets that linger a moment, watches the way Mason's pupils dilate at the thought of either, at the thought of both and looks away before his own eyes can give away how sick the thought makes him. How sick the words do. He fiddles with the filter, already nauseous with the taste of tobacco, craving the loosening, numbing, addictive smoke in the room beyond. Craving the harsh powder and cold wine.

"What would you have me do, Mason? He is hardy, he will not fall to idle threats, he will not bend to violence easily. You will tire yourself before you make him speak, that way."

It's a satisfying response, one of the few that Mason's had that night, by his memory. He holds the cigarette perched between his lips and reaches out to stroke the backs of his fingers down Hannibal's cheek, swollen soft from breaking against the boy that in Mason's mind is already being quartered.

"You sound like you've already tried," the younger man quips brightly. He plucks the cigarette away from his mouth and points with it. "This is good. This is what I need."

Mason leans closer, tilted onto one hip towards Hannibal, hand splayed against the table to support himself.

"He has what we want - money, or information, as you rightly pointed out. Very good, Hannibal," chirps the man. "Very good. And we have what he wants."

He tilts his head to watch a trickle of smoke spiral upwards from his lips, a shift in energy overtaking him, the sullen exhaustion of adrenaline now giving way to a euphoria, a giddy eagerness that shows his age more than most moments.

"We have the opium. We have the cocaine. And we have *you*. He'll come calling for one or all of those. We inform him, strongly if necessary, that he is no longer allowed to leave due to a security concern," Mason continues. "And once we have him, we hold him, and we take all of those things that he wants away from him."

Mason pushes upright, grinning, and ticks off on his fingers. "One, two, *three*." He taps Hannibal's nose on the final count, before pushing himself back off the table. "I swear, Hannibal, if one of those brats doesn't get in here and clean up that blood, they'll be licking it off the floorboards."

"Unlock the door, " Hannibal advises, eyes already glassy with thought and the anticipation of genuine cloying *wrongness* of it.

He listens as Mason attempts to make his displeasure known in broken - in any other situation, laughable - Turkish, and stands, at the exasperated whine, to translate for Tariq, who comes in.

"Nod your head or shake it," Hannibal asks, Turkish soft, keeping his tone neutral, as though simply passing on instructions. "Is he outside?"

The boy glances to Mason, the other too preoccupied with his damaged hand again to listen, to look, and nods. Hannibal sighs, gestures unnecessarily to the floor. Before the boy turns to get a rag, he palms him a dried fig, the corners of his mouth barely lifting to mirror the boy's eager smile.

He wonders when he last ate.

"You'll find another one if this one doesn't make it," Mason assures Hannibal, apropos of nothing in particular but his own attention on Tariq, rag in hand and knees dropping to the floor. "There's always more."

He exhales a long last drag and turns the cigarette over in his fingers a few times, watching the boy diligently mop up the sticky little pools of blood. Finally he decides to simply extinguish it in one of the whiskey glasses, sighing.

"We'll need to convince him to stay. Force him to if he won't. He's already hurting, so he'll come back wanting the pipe. Moreso if he hurts more," Mason adds, hand shifting to and fro in consideration. "Don't let him sleep, maybe, keep him puffed full of powder."

Mason's thoughts hit an almost visible snag, and he trails his fingers through the boy's hair absently as he passes by him, back towards Hannibal.

"And if he's desperate enough to throw himself at you like that," Mason considers, taking in the form and structure of the man's face as he stands near to him, less like looking on a friend, and far more like studying an intricate device, to figure out the best way inside of it. "If you were hurt, imagine how quickly he would turn over about her. Imagine!"

Hannibal breathes out his own slow exhale, extinguishes the filter as he had the other, all the time watching Mason, unblinking. He doesn't fear the man's wrath, has felt his displeasure, has had his bones broken and his blood tasted. He fears the accuracy of Mason's thoughts.

He thinks of his own blood boiling when Will was struck to the floor, his own terror and anger and agony listening to him sob.

He wonders how broken he is, how damaged, that he did not kill the man immediately, did not heed Will's desperate plea to run with him.

Stay your course.

He thinks of the answer to his first letter.

To him you are a hound, to this you are crucial.

And to his last.

"Very," he admits softly.

"Very," Mason agrees brightly, patting Hannibal's cheek. But the quieting of Hannibal's tone catches his attention, curiously tilting his head, as though having heard a far away sound, or caught a peculiar scent on the wind.

No more than that, and he sighs, eyes rolling towards the ceiling.

"You know I don't like to have to do this to you," he intones. "You know it hurts me, too, don't you? Maybe even worse than it hurts you. You're so big and you'll be so full of poppy by then - I'm *sure*, as ever - that you'll hardly feel it."

Mason's lips downturn into a frown, not false, but more a conceptualization of an expression that one should have, in theory, when experiencing a sensation of sympathy.

"You'll be *fine*, Hannibal. It'll only go until the boy talks, and then we'll patch you up and you'll be right as rain. I know, I know," he sighs, "normally this only happens to you as punishment. Or because I need to do it, sometimes, you know - to make sure you still know your master's hand - and it must seem very unfair to have to punish you for not doing anything."

He reaches, grasps Hannibal's cheek in his palm and holds it there, fingers just curling to press sharp into his skin.

"If it'll make you feel better, you can consider it punishment for your friend Miss Katz's *rudeness*, okay?"

Hannibal says nothing, lets his eyes linger on Mason's before he blinks, acquiescence, and the younger man slaps him gently before letting go. Hannibal presses his tongue hard against the inside of his mouth and takes five breaths, slow, steadying, before turning to the boy at his feet, still diligently scrubbing to floor.

He had noted Mason's attention to him, had felt his heart hammer watching the cigarette turn in his fingers. Agitated as Mason is now, Hannibal cannot leave the boy to him. He has left so many others. He had let go of Will.

He cannot.

Not again.

"Before we cut it, we should smoke," he suggests, tone neutral, easy enough not to have to fake his want for it; his hands are beginning to shake from being away from the pipes so long. A shrug when Mason raises an eyebrow.

"Such stress for one day. Indulge with me."

A smile, predatory and slow, and Mason inclines his head.

"Hers is always the best." No resentment there currently, no outright hatred for which Hannibal is thankful. Mason moves as though to get the product himself before the stains on his jacket catch his eye and he makes a sound like a petulant child, infuriated.

"Insufferable."

"Leave it with the orphans, they can scrub it in the morning."

"They'll damage it."

"Then you will damage them." Hannibal points out. "And if they don't, you get your jacket. You really must stop over thinking. Your pessimism is cloying."

Mason snorts, partially amused, partially disgusted, before sighing and rubbing a hand harsh through his hair. Then he trudges past Hannibal to seek upstairs for something he can change into. Hannibal watches him go.

"Leave the rag," he murmurs, eyes still up, his words lilting and soft again, aimed at Tariq. "I will take it, and you listen to me."

He finally turns, sees the boy look up at him, eyes unusually light, radiating against his dark skin. Hannibal offers a gentle smile, crouches beside him.

"The man outside is hurting," he tells him. "I need him to go home, but he cannot walk alone."

He reaches into his pocket for another fig, holds it out of the boy's grasp with a smile before adding a few coins from his other pocket to his palm.

"Take him home, make sure he can get into bed, then leave him be. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, Abi." A smile, wide, bright, and Hannibal's eyes crinkle to mirror, before he passes the fruit and money over, watches the boy trot out of the den and to the street.

When Mason returns in his short sleeves and suspenders, no vest or jacket, no gloves, the floor is clean. He looks younger, but for the panic still ringed around his eyes. Hannibal does not sigh his relief for sending the boy away when he notes Mason's grasping fingers, or the snarl perched just in the curve of his lips.

"Where is -"

"Your hand," Hannibal observes. "It's becoming quite swollen."

Mason blinks, and turns his head down towards his hand again before his eyes finally follow suit.

"I can feel it."

"I imagine so," responds Hannibal. "The opium will help with the pain. Would you like me to look at it?"

A laugh, surprisingly soft despite the curl of the younger man's body, hunger transparent in every movement that isn't bent towards destruction.

"That's right," Mason drawls. "You used to be a doctor, didn't you?" He steps nearer to where Hannibal sits with the bloodied rag hidden beneath his thigh, and offers out his hand. It is a childlike gesture, eyes wide behind his glasses, trusting.

Hannibal takes the younger man's hand - so soft and unmarked that it seems impossible to be the source of so much destruction - and cradles it in one hand, pressing softly with the other.

"I can feel it," Mason repeats again, a tone of dismay in his mild whine. "Normally I can't feel them at all."

He does not turn to Mason. Fingertips press carefully across the delicate bones, swollen to a rich muddle of crimson and purple. He thinks of Tariq, who may not be so lucky to escape Mason's wrath again. He thinks of him with Will, and how neither would have sense enough to run.

He thinks of Mason, standing before him in pain and distress.

Hannibal presses hard enough to feel the man's bones slide against each other, and Mason jerks his hand free with a hiss.

"It is not broken," Hannibal replies, unmoved. "I've prepared your pipe for you with the finest cuts of Miss Katz's resins. You will cease to feel in very little time at all."

A narrow look is shot over Mason's shoulder before he retreats, and Hannibal rises to join him, stuffing the rag into his pocket as he does.

He'll see the man choke on it.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

"What I find *interesting* is how Miss Katz refused to see me. For months. *Months*, Will, can you imagine? Refused to see her most loyal customer. And then one day, yesterday, she agrees to come by." Mason turns on his heel and meanders back to Hannibal, the man in the process of lighting a cigarette that Mason calmly tugs from his lips and flicks away.

"Do you know what the only difference was, between the first ten times I asked, and this time?"

He turns to Will, expectant, the other swallows.

"No."

"*You.*"

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: graphic violence, empathy torture. This chapter involves someone being bagged and beaten, if this triggers you, please be wary.

The only acceptable way to break is death...

They could have run. Together, they could have run.

Fled to the station at Mile End, back alleys and side-streets, and taken the first train to anywhere-but-London. Found their way back to Will's home in roundabout fashion, kept secret and safe by their own wits. The man who would pursue them has few enough allies now, all underpaid and increasingly hungry for what they're owed. The man who would pursue them hardly leaves his own den, a prince among the poor in Old Nichol.

They could have run, together, Will considers, fingers pressed to his eyes until he sees stars behind them, until the bruise beneath them, livid across his nose, pulses in time with his heart.

...and I do not fear it.

He knew, somewhere far inside, that Hannibal would not, as Hannibal must know that Will would not. Not when there's still a job to be done, a madman to remove from his throne of blood and tears. Not when the other still remains in the East End.

Not without the other by their side.

Will forces a breath into lungs that push throbbing against the cracked cage of bone around them, and holds it until it burns. The door opens for him beneath a hand that feels unlike his own, attached to a body of which Will feels only an observer. He sees Tariq on the couch, unharmed and sound asleep. He left Will at the corner the night before, upon Will's insistence and a handful of coin that the boy not know where he stays. Will's letter that night told all that he knows, saw, heard, perceived, a litany of information major and minor, until his pain grew so sharp he could no longer sit.

He edges by the boy's couch to settle into another, and lights the lamp himself to smoke the remains of resin left from the night before. A mistake, perhaps, to dull his sensitivities in this way, to numb his perception, but he doubts, as vapor spreads past his lips, that the day will require it.

What he does not doubt is that he hurts, bones bruised and swollen ugly from the blows he gladly suffered in Hannibal's stead. What he does not doubt is that the day is unlikely to bring little more than a continuation of that pain.

And what he does not doubt is that Mason will find him here, and when he does, standing starkly still above the couch where Will blinks himself to awareness, Will coughs softly into his fist and rolls aching onto his side, turning his back to the man.

A sigh, a click of his tongue and Mason's hand insinuates into the tangled, soft curls, stroking Will gently, almost kindly.

"Little puppy."

There is a sound of fabric shifting, almost as though Mason is crouching beside the couch, the gentle caressing continues and Will doesn't turn.

"You know, this is why I could never be patient enough to keep a dog for very long," Mason muses, and he sounds almost lucid, he sounds younger. "It would inevitably disobey a command and I would respond accordingly. And they truly aren't as sturdy as you would think such an animal should be."

The fingers turn gently, run surprisingly softly against Will's scalp before Mason stands again.

"With age, you learn to accept disappointment, you have to live with it. A business venture can go awry before it's fixed, and puppies will always disobey before you teach them not to."

An affectionate pat to Will's cheek and then the hand is gone, perhaps Mason himself is. Will counts three beats of his heart before turning, but doesn't even make it the full way around to see Mason before he feels hands, strong, against his shoulders yanking him up.

With a yelp, he goes, limbs lazy and lax with the vapor, exhausted and stiff and sore. The floor comes up fast beneath him, hands quick to stop a collision with it but too quick for Will not to hiss in pain. His elbow is pulled and he feels it snare at his ribs, muffling a cry by pressing his lips together so hard they're numb.

Only once he's brought to the back room, conspicuously absent of tables and with only several chairs in their place, does he speak, urgent, wide-eyed focus on Mason, and Mason alone.

"I came back," Will insists, breathless. "I came back to -"

The slap is not particularly hard, but enough to clap loudly through the room. Enough to startle Will into silence, into a slow blink past the watery pain that heats in his eyes, the bruise that spreads where normally he might blush throbbing from the sensation. He lifts a hand to his cheek and watches Mason, silent.

"I know what you came back to," Mason purrs, drawing up against Will and pushing a gloved hand through his hair again, to force his head into a tilt. "I know *who* you came back to, and I know what you came back *for*."

Will closes his eyes, head lowered as if in obedience. A submission that pulls another hum from Mason, until the man lifts Will's chin again with fingers pressed into his cheeks.

"I've always been very honest with you, Will, very upfront in allowing you close to my business. Partners. And if the right hand," Mason grits, tapping his hand against Will's cheek, "doesn't know what the left," another tap, to the other side, "is doing, then the whole system ceases to function."

A hard swallow as Will nods, ignoring the pulse of pain from the rough touches, forcing himself to steady with a deep breath as Mason presses against him, chest to chest.

"So I'll ask you now, since we're so *close*. Is there something you need to tell me, Will?"

He remains still, knowing that any gesture, any movement would be stopped - that with every breath that grinds against his ribs, he could not overpower the man who stands at his toes, watching with bright-eyed expectation. Will does not let himself close his eyes, looking just past Mason as he answers, softly.

"I came back," he begins, and there is only the barest flinch as Mason raises his hand in warning. "I came back because I have to. I've nowhere else to go. I need," he hesitates, "this. I need what you have here and - if I truly did not, then I would not have returned at all."

A pause, a blink, before Mason's lips purse and brows rise in a frightening parody of concern and he nods slowly, emulating understanding as Will supposes he thinks a human being would.

"Just another little lost boy, after all," he says, setting an arm over Will's shoulders, relishing in the shiver he feels run through the younger man. "No place to call home, no friends, no one to keep you safe but Mason, I know."

He strokes the side of Will's face with a gloved hand before snaring curls between his fingers and pulling harshly back, though his tone remains entirely neutral, entirely soft and gentle, almost coaxing.

"And yet you have not answered my question, Will. I want you to tell me something. Confide in me. Whisper into my ear if you're embarrassed, that's *okay*." Another hand against Will's chest, patting gently, painfully close to where the damage had been done, and Will draws a sharp breath and holds it.

A click of the tongue and Mason tugs, pulls Will along a few steps before tossing him into a chair hard enough to force him to catch his balance before he and the chair both topple.

"I suppose trust earned must be exercised. Under supervision, with a third party entirely uninvolved in the misunderstanding between us."

Will knows without knowing who he means, and he forces himself not to react beyond another rough swallow, fingers clutching the chair beneath him. He lowers his head again, bows it, and works his voice free from where it snares in his throat.

"I'll answer," he breathes, and he can feel himself starting to shake even through the weight of smoke in his limbs that now seems so insufficient. "I'll - I'll answer your questions, Mason. Please," Will asks, turning up just enough to watch the man from under his hair. "Let me make it right. The misunderstanding. I -"

He doesn't stand. Doesn't move, but for the breaths that are coming shorter and shorter still, despite how Will insists to himself that he is still in control - that nothing Mason can do to him can make him say anything that he doesn't mean to say.

He is very good at his job, he reminds himself, and feels a straightening in his spine, a steadying in his voice.

He will not break, because it is not an option.

"Ask me," Will insists. "Ask me what you would know and I will tell you, Mason."

"You will," the man nods, "I know you will. I can be very persuasive. Very good for a businessman. Very off-putting when it doesn't work, and yet there is always room to grow and expand. In business, in ideas, in persuasive techniques."

There's a shuffle outside the door and Will feels his heart lodge in his throat, though he keeps his eyes on Mason, chin down, a dog in everything but form.

Hannibal isn't struggling so much as he is very gently resisting. He doesn't look worse for wear, he looks like he's been roused from bed, and Will wonders for a brief moment if his guess that the den was also his home was correct. He doesn't think of the alternative reason the man would be there. The thought makes him sick.

Hannibal shrugs the hands off of him and they go easily, obviously not there to restrain, at least not yet. He gives Mason a dirty look, doesn't spare one to Will at the moment.

"Some of us still sleep," he mutters.

Will wants nothing more than to watch the man, but assured that he is whole, that he is unbruised and undamaged, averts his eyes. He was not beaten then, when Will was thrown out last night. Neither was the boy who likely now has roused wisely from his couch and fled from the commotion. Will caught the worst of it, and it makes him hurt so much less for knowing that.

Mason's eyes roll towards the ceiling, an almost comic exaggeration before he turns to Hannibal and runs a hand firmly along the man's cheek. "And some of us have sense enough not to smoke our way into catatonia every night, *Hannibal*. Some of us care about the business we're trying to run. *Some* of us, Hannibal, would like to see our work turn into more than just *smoke*."

He turns from the man, and slaps the back of a chair as he passes. "Sit. Since you're so tired, sit, please, Hannibal, make yourself comfortable."

The chair faces Will, and with a sharp awareness, like hearing a window shatter, Will's entire body tightens.

"Ask me," he insists again as Mason crosses closer to him.

Mason sighs, tilting his head to regard Will as though he were a wounded animal, and as far as Will knows, that is entirely how the man sees him. A whining dog, curled around his master's feet after a beating, tail between his legs.

"Let's start," Mason laughs, "let's start with our friend here." He claps a hand onto Hannibal's shoulder, rubbing briskly as he circles to stand behind him. "Our good friend Hannibal, and what you two have been doing together. What was it you told me, Will? *Illegal practices*? Not very smart for a boy from good money."

Will says nothing to this, tilts his head a little and forces himself to breathe.

"And what did you tell me, Hannibal? Right," chuckles the man. "Right - *a childish infatuation*."

A quick look up at this, and Will curses himself for it when he does, and it's already too much, already drawn the attention of the cobra in their midst who hones in on Will with a narrow focus.

"Perhaps," Will breathes, and he yields to them a gentle smile. "Perhaps it was."

"You are a very good liar, Will, but not today," Mason informs him, almost entirely too pleased with himself. "You *care*. You thought *he* cared." A laugh then, bright and sharp and almost genuine.

"Like a fairytale in old London town, this is *priceless*." He presses his palms together, the tips of his fingers against his lips as he paces, shifts his body in a nervous, bouncing sort of way that would be jovial if it wasn't so frightening.

"I suppose," a pause, bottom lip licked into Mason's mouth before he gestures, an almost forgiving thing, absent, "being new I can forgive you the rudeness of your interruption of my business meeting. It happens. You'll remember not to, next time."

Mason turns then, sets his hands against the back of Hannibal's chair and leans over him, watching Will with wide, blue eyes, enhanced somewhat by the lenses that cover them.

"You know, I had to teach him too. Our Hannibal wasn't always the good, stoic guard dog he is now, I had to *train* him. Break him in like a wild horse." A pop of his lips and he returns to his previous train of thought.

"But I cannot help but wonder *why* you were so adamant that Miss Katz leave us so quickly. Were you concerned? Did she have somewhere to be?" Mason presses his lips together, steps closer to Will. "I'm asking," he soothes. "Asking like you asked me to. So tell me, Will. Where was she going?"

There is a relief when Mason comes nearer Will again, rather than Hannibal. Will's fingers remain clenched into the chair on which he sits, but he leans toward Mason, eager, baiting him to come closer still. He likes to hurt boys, and Will plays to it, swollen lips parting for him as though breathless when he comes near, a play at childishness in watching from under his hair, his eyes blackened from the punch that left a split across his nose.

Youthful and eager and broken.

It's only when the distraction display catches Mason's attention and draws him slinking closer still that Will realizes he has no idea what to answer.

"She," he begins, and he shakes his head, a little too hard, a little too fast. "She wasn't going to sell if you kept her here. She was considering it, but if you had restrained her she would not have sold. The threat startled her but if she trusts Hannibal, and she trusts me after I helped her leave, she would consider it - for the business, Mason, if not for the business I would never have - "

Will is less surprised by the slap that silences him than he is that he was allowed to say so much. Less surprised by Mason's words than the fact that he turns away from Will, and retreats towards Hannibal.

"That isn't what I asked you, Will," Mason scolds, clucking tongue against his teeth. He settles his hands on Hannibal's shoulders again, but lets one skim up the man's neck, pressed to his skin even as Hannibal shifts slightly from it. When he speaks again, each word is emphasized with a slap, the first gentle, and the final - his name - enough to force Will to close his eyes.

"Where did she go, Will?"

"I don't know," Will hisses. "I don't know where she went."

"See?" Mason's voice is too loud, it almost makes Will flinch. "See you *can* be honest with me. I *believed* you then!"

He runs a hand through Hannibal's hair and grips it to tilt his head back before letting go and walking away again, fingers working the cuffs of his shirt before folding them up messily against his arms.

"You don't know where she went. We don't know where she went. We can assume she went to America." The word is hissed again, like a cruel hook, before the expression on Mason's face passes to something more calm. "America and her glory there, and her prized monetary rewards. Fickle."

A shake of his head and Mason tugs his own hair as he walks back over to Will, almost distracted, eyes in the middle distance until he stands directly in front of the boy's chair, flicks his eyes to meet his.

"But you know what I find the most interesting?"

There is silence, a beat too long and Mason lifts his face to the ceiling and groans, hands up to rub his eyes beneath his glasses.

"Come on, Will, this can't be a conversation if I'm doing all the talking. I know what I have to say. I'm well within my own mind to know that. What I want to know is what you have to say. What you have to say interests me very much. It interests Hannibal very much." A shrug. "Or, I suppose, it's in his very best *interest* to hear what you have to say."

Mason tilts his head, meets Will's eyes again.

"One more time. Do you know what I find the most interesting, Will?"

"What do you find the most interesting?" Will's voice is quiet, and Mason barks a sharp delighted laugh.

"Better, much better. What I find *interesting* is how Miss Katz refused to see me. For months. *Months*, Will, can you imagine? Refused to see her most loyal customer. And then one day, yesterday, she agrees to come by." Mason turns on his heel and meanders back to Hannibal, the man in the process of lighting a cigarette that Mason calmly tugs from his lips and flicks away.

"Do you know what the only difference was, between the first ten times I asked, and this time?"

He turns to Will, expectant, the other swallows.

"No."

"*You*."

Will watches the two men who brought Hannibal in as they circle towards Will now, impassive, one to the other. He considers their size, the likelihood that one or both are carrying knives, and though he could certainly reach one, the fact he can scarcely turn himself to follow their movement without feeling a pain so sharp he has to restrain a wince informs him that anything he's thinking is particularly unwise.

Many things he's thinking, most likely.

"I've never met the woman before last night," Will insists softly. He does not look to Hannibal again, turning back from the men to watch Mason instead, and acutely aware that Hannibal has not once yet looked towards him. "I knew little enough about the meeting until you asked me to be there, and only then what I could gather from the conversation."

It is a slip of tongue, a turn of phrase inconsequential to any but the most astute, or the most paranoid. Mason is both, and Will can feel the shiver of pleasure without needing to see it.

"Gather, Will? For who? Will - for whom are you gathering?"

Will sighs, taut frustration.

Mason doesn't wait for him to answer. The backhand lands hard across Hannibal's face, more strength than Will would have expected, and Will starts to stand but two hands snare his shoulders and pull him back into his chair.

"For no one, Mason, you *asked* me to be there! Should I have not listened? Then why ask me to come?"

"I asked you as an associate, I said nothing about gathering anything from conversations."

Will jerks, feels fingers dig sharper into his shoulders and he sits still again, eyes on Hannibal, mind too slow from the smoke, too battered, to think clearly, to think beyond how all he wants is for the man to look at him.

"Please." It's a sigh, playing back to the helplessness with which he'd come in. "I came here because of Hannibal, because I lost to him so often I needed to pay some debts. I asked him for a drink, he suggested here, that's all."

Mason hums, disbelieving, displeased, and it hits Will, hard as the punch against Hannibal's stomach that sends the man gasping, curling in his chair, that nothing he says will matter, nothing he says will stop this. It will go until Mason is satisfied, until Hannibal is just as bloodied as Will had been, perhaps further still.

He feels the sting of tears, squeezed forth from frustration, and shakes his head.

"I work for no one. I have never worked a day in my life, do you think I'd be here if I had?"

His eyes desperately seek Hannibal's again, find them averted, and feels his panic rise like nausea he can't swallow down.

"Hannibal, tell him. Tell him, you know me."

"Do not," barks Mason. "Do not speak to him! Do not! I didn't tell you to, and you *will* not. You answer to me!"

Will could almost laugh for the futility of it. Maybe he does, it's hard to know with the deafening rush in his ears and the vaporous calm that never comes, with the wet smack of

skin against skin as Mason hits Hannibal again.

The hands on Will's shoulders stop him from dropping his head into his hands, and Mason's shout for them to make Will watch, to make him see, jerks him back against the chair. It is a muddle now, a violent electric thrum through his body as his hair is pulled to force his head up.

He sees Hannibal spit thick onto the floor, and still the man does not look at him.

Will chokes back a sob.

"I met the boy as he says," Hannibal intones, no more variation to his voice than when he had arrived half-asleep. "A game of cards at a public house."

Will doesn't close his eyes in time to miss the fist that lands brutal to Hannibal's face, breath hitching, throat too tight to fill his lungs, bile rising to block it further still. He cannot hear the man that he loves in the thick, slurred voice that emerges past Hannibal's mouth. He cannot hear the soft foreign words, the gentle shushes. He cannot hear the laugh that Hannibal kissed against his shoulder.

What he hears is the shell of a person who has had their life driven out of them entirely.

"He won the first game. I won every hand after."

Another blow and Will cries out, his body slumping but held in place, hard in the chair.

"Please," begs Will. "Please, Mason. He - he doesn't know."

"If he doesn't, then you do!"

It is futile, entirely hopeless, and Will could scream.

"Too often have I heard about *America*, too close a call with Katz to be mere coincidence. Will. Put yourself in *my shoes* for a second!" A sigh, flustered, and Mason stops, draws a hand through his hair and Will notes the way the blood tugs at the blond strands when he drops it again.

"You are as invested in this as I am, as he is, and you know, nothing was wrong, before you, nothing was *wrong*, or out of place or suspicious." Mason raises his arms wide in a shrug and laughs, an almost helpless breathy sound.

"And then you. With your wicked tongue and lack of self restraint, and your *sighs*, *God*." He purses his lips, tilts his head at Will again.

"Boys like you don't just show up on my doorstep without a reason. You have the money and means to be away from here, you are not. You have no reason to be here unless you were sent." A swallow, a deep calming breath. "So who sent you?"

Will's eyes flick to Hannibal, sitting unheld where Mason had left him, taking everything that is forced on him, not fighting back, not using the strength that Will knows he has, that he can

feel when the man pulls him close, when he pins him to the wall and hitches up his thighs and holds Will hard against him.

"Is he distracting you? I'm sorry." Mason's voice is pitchy again, hysterical as it had been the night before, and he turns to Hannibal, pointing unnecessarily. One of his sleeves has slid further down his arm than the other, caught a few drops of blood on the starched fabric.

"Maybe I've left you too much to look at. I can remedy that. I can negotiate, Will, this is a *conversation* after all, between *partners*." He steps back around to place himself behind Hannibal, fidgeting with something in his pocket Will can't yet see.

The weapon glints dark as oil in the ill lighting, not the sheen of a blade but blacker, far more hideous. Mason rests the gun against Hannibal's shoulder, aimed squarely at Will, and jerks his head in a nod towards the men at Will's side, teeth bared in something distantly related to a grin.

"If he won't stop staring, then we'll make him stop, won't we?" Mason asks the men on either side of Will. He leans his hand, finger resting against the trigger, against Hannibal's cheek almost affectionately, and Will starts to turn towards the whisper of fabric behind him before he is blind.

Rough canvas blackens the room and Will's breath pools against him. He can feel how short it becomes, out of his control now, no space left in his lungs to even give voice to a sob.

Hannibal never looked at him, and Will hurtles himself forward only to find himself pulled back so quickly that the chair falls back beneath him. His head cracks against the floor and he gasps, ears ringing almost loud enough to drown out Mason's giddy laughter, his shouts of delight.

"Oh, that was simply *elegant*, gentlemen, truly *stunning*."

Every step towards him across the old floorboards sends a spark through him, flinching. His wrists are snared when he reaches for the hood, to breathe, to see, to not feel the canvas sucked against his mouth and there is no relief, none, from the man or from the material, from the sound of flesh breaking against bone with a damp crunch.

He might be shouting, now, pleading for Mason to hit him instead, telling him that he knows *her*, whoever it is that he fears so greatly, begging him please, God, please leave Hannibal, he's done nothing wrong.

He might be shouting, but it stops suddenly when he feels a cold, hard circle press against his forehead.

"Calm down."

The voice is so gentle, so normal, that Will actually laughs, a brief hitched sound before he bites his lip to stop the laugh from becoming hysterical. He can barely breathe, he can't see, he can hear just his own ragged breathing, too loud to drown out everything else.

“Please,” he breathes, cloth moving above his lips. Mason’s sigh is loud enough to hear through the ringing in his head and for a moment the gun is taken away. Will cries out, flails with his legs when the chair is righted and he’s held down against it once more. The gun returns, stroking gentle at the corner of his eye.

“No, see, that word I don’t need.” Mason tells him, and he sounds normal, no longer pitched above his normal tone, no longer manic and speaking too fast to understand. He’s breathless, but he sounds like a person. It makes it all the more frightening.

“That word I hear so often, and it gets me nowhere, it gets me nothing.”

The barrel feels cold even through the canvas and Will closes his eyes against it, feeling it slide almost like a caress down under his eye, pressing deliberately harder over the sensitive bruising and over to his nose.

“So you say it, everyone says it, ‘please, Mason, slow down’, ‘please, Mason, be gentle’, ‘please, Mason, I’m bleeding’.” The gun taps the tip of Will’s nose and Mason’s voice is closer, though no louder.

“*I know.* I know it hurts, I know you’re bleeding. Because I did that, I want that. *Me. Mason.* Adding ‘please’ to a fact does not change it, Will, it makes the request redundant.”

The gun slips over Will’s lips and he parts them, body shaking, eyes closed, breath pulling with it the stale smell of the canvas.

“Please gets me nothing I want, Will. Heed me, here, that it won’t do anything for you either.” A sigh, a motion with the gun that doesn’t push it much deeper but suggests a shrug.

“Mason.” Hannibal’s voice sounds garbled, rougher, he’s in pain and it makes Will jerk in his chair again, bite against the gun on reflex as he’s pulled back.

“No. *You*, you have done enough. Sit still, I’m nearly done.”

Will knows, in that moment, beyond any uncertainty, that it is Hannibal who knows. It is Hannibal who has engineered whatever is happening here, to which Will himself has not even been made privy. It is Hannibal that knows *her*, who has over god knows how many years waited and set the parts in place for the machine that now roars to life.

"I've lied to him as much as I have you," Will hisses sharply between his teeth. He leans, seeking blindly, twisting rough against the hands that hold his own in place behind the chair.

"You're lying right now," Mason sighs, bored, and Will wrenches forward again.

"You said yourself, didn't you? Something like me doesn't simply show up out of nowhere, lay myself at your doorstep. At his feet," Will insists, and he delights, a savage thrill as he feels Mason move closer to him again. "Exactly what he wanted, isn't it? A pretty boy to share his bed."

Mason draws out a curious sound, and Will gasps as he feels the gun press squarely to his temple, so hard it nearly forces him from the chair.

"So then if that's true," Mason considers, idly, "then you're both equally at fault, aren't you?"

"Mason! He's lying, the boy is a fool, heed -"

"Heed you," spits Mason. "Yes, I've heard that more than enough times. 'Don't kill him, Mason', 'heed me', 'I'll do it myself'," the man snarls, poking the barrel against Will's skull. "Probably didn't tell that to you, did he, when you were sighing his name so softly."

Will can feel the man roll his shoulders, the jab of metal that has made his mouth acrid, dry with fear.

"Who is it then? Is it you, or is it Hannibal?"

They shout in unison. Each bears the blame on their shoulders. Each takes the burden of the other. Neither will yield. Neither will break. All Will wishes is that he had looked, one last time, wishes Hannibal had turned his eyes for just an instant, only one, and his own close as he feels the hammer click.

"I love y-"

"Oh *God*," sighs Mason, before the gun pulls away, and the world is silent.

And it is startling how loud a lack of sound really is, how it manifests itself into a ringing, a humming, that goes on ceaselessly, too loud, too much, and for a while that's all.

Then one breath, and another, heart hammering so fast it's lost in the void of white noise in his head and all Will can feel is the heat of his own panting pushed back from the canvas against his face.

Still black, still loud, too hot, too close, and everything hurts.

"No," carried on a breath, perhaps not even voiced at all. But the darkness doesn't get any clearer no matter how wide he opens his eyes. Still there. Still pressing.

Breath after breath after breath on and on and fast enough to not draw any oxygen in and then a wail, so soft it's barely heard, so long it pulls at the lining of his lungs as though they might invert and pull his soul with them. A sound that dies in a series of shaking little sobs, wet sniffs and a clicking in his throat.

And the next sound is a howl.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Margot draws a breath and steadies her hand. And what to say to Hannibal, whose life has been all but lost - may have been entirely, she thinks with a rough swallow that suffices for tears she will not allow to flow, here or there or ever again.

So many lives destroyed because of a cruel, stupid boy.

“Less than a month.”

A sigh.

“Is it exhausting being so cynical?”

“I can’t be anything but what I am,” comes the easy reply.

Margot’s brow lifts and a faint smile purses her lips together. “You wouldn’t be nearly so successful if you were.”

“Insult and flattery in nearly the same breath,” sighs Frederika, tilting her head to watch Margot pass by her towards her closet. “You *must* be anxious.”

She receives a sigh in return and Margot slides her fingers against the sheen of summer sweat along her neck, eyes rolling closed. “I’m ready to have it done with.”

“It’s been years.”

“That,” Margot laughs darkly, “is something I know far more innately than you can imagine. It isn’t even a matter of *Mason*.” The name is a burning coal on her tongue, nearly spit as she says it. “He’s got a list of fine fellows ready to have their pound of flesh from him, and not nearly enough to go around. It’s the amount of damage he’s caused and what it’s going to take to try and fix it all.”

Frederika shifts, legs cross and slight fingers smoothing out her skirt. Hunter green, to play up the coils of copper hair that curl around her face, every bit the lovely Irish lass despite being decidedly of mingled American stock. An accent adopted readily enough to settle in with the immigrants, and drop just as quickly to move amongst the know-nothings - charming, malleable, and just as terrible and wonderful in her mud-slinging nom de plume.

None of them would ever expect the sweet and bawdy girl with whom they’ve shared a pint to be the same byline name that’s helped to grease the wheels of Tammany.

Margot twines her fingers through a crimson curl as she passes back by towards her luggage cases.

"It isn't as though you don't have money," Freddie reminds her.

"It certainly isn't. But there are some things, believe it or not, that money cannot fix," she chastens softly, and Freddie tosses her head like a pony, ever-wild, laughing.

"I've yet to discover the truth of that statement, if enough money is involved."

The other woman hums an acknowledgment, and nods towards the desk. "There, beneath the pen. Read that and tell me I haven't proved to you the truth of it."

For a time, there is little more sound than the racket of wheels in the street below, peddlers shouting wares and children chasing each other through the puddles sunk so much into the street that they seemed never to go away, not even now with the sun scalding hot enough to dry the mud in the streets to grey cakes of dust. Freddie reads from page to page, and then a second time - the first for understanding, the second for memorization.

She always has been terribly clever, and Margot's fond glance drops to the scrawled-upon note, before shifting back to her suitcases.

"Have you had this long?" Freddie finally asks.

"It came last night," Margot shrugs, an adjustment to her skirts, a brief huff of air to lift a lock of hair that stubbornly refuses to sit tight in the bun at the back of her head.

"He so rarely sends missives. And this..." A frown, genuine concern before Margot lets her eyes slide to the window, meditate on what's beyond. It will take just over a week to get to Southampton by boat, a day or so, from there to London itself.

"It is strange he sent a telegram." Freddie frowns, setting the pages back to the table, returning the pen on top. Something of that length would take a lot of money, money not usually risked in that part of the city, very rarely carried. It would be noticed. "Very dangerous."

"Desperate," Margot corrects. "Desperation drives reason from the most level-headed men."

"His violence sounds to have grown."

"Perhaps Hannibal was right - that I've waited too long," Margot intones, snapping her clothes to lie flat, packing quickly. "It was merely a matter of time until he rattled himself so loose that he fell apart entirely, and it was unfair of me, truly, to expect Hannibal to continue making repairs to something I know to be fundamentally broken."

Freddie rises, skirts softly sifting, and settles again on the edge of the bed alongside the cargo.

"Your brother is not your responsibility."

"Then whose?" Margot asks, wide-eyed. "Hannibal? The young man from the Yard? No, they were brought into his path only by my hand, and will remain there until he churns them over like a carriage cart against the cobbles."

A slim hand settles on Margot's and she jerks it away, startled when she meets Freddie's wide eyes.

"Calm, Margot."

She shakes her head, her flurry of words and gestures stilled for a moment.

"Is he dangerous to you?" asks Freddie, and the look that she receives says more than words might. She sucks her lower lip into her mouth and resists the urge to ask.

"A month. No more, and then it is done. I will pay them, release them from my service. Offer them work here should they brook no further comfort in England. New York should be so lucky as to have men of their integrity come to her. There are certainly none here now."

Freddie grins at that, leaning back on her hands. "I can't imagine anyone would know what to do with the last two honest men. Presume them to be lying, most likely, truth being rather the most clever lie of all. What will become of the parlor?"

"Would that I might burn it to embers and ash," Margot declares, and Freddie sighs, amused. "In truth, I know not. Sell it back to the Turks perhaps. Relinquish it to the city. Keep it for myself, much as he's frittered away his inheritance on it, I should have at least that."

Freddie frowns a little, a slight twist of lips as she picks at the embroidery on the bed cover beneath her. "And your investments here?"

"I will return," Margot insists again. "Unless there's a sudden chrysalis of new Swallowtails, we are paid with Croker several months in advance. The mayor himself is a Tiger and will not touch the brothels or the dance halls. There will be no reason for you to even come near the money while I am away."

"I wouldn't dare," Freddie laughs. "It would compromise my integrity, after all."

At this, Margot's smile appears again, however briefly. "Once I am settled, I will telegraph you and let you know where I might be reached should something go awry. I will write. There is no choice but to move now - you've read his message. It has gone beyond discomfort and perhaps so far as -"

"Do not speak it," Freddie interjects, rising to catch Margot's hands in her own. "He is strong, you have said so yourself."

Their hands squeeze together and Margot draws Freddie into a warm embrace.

"Less than a month."

He isn't certain what he knows but he scents it on the wind He will kill us both Will not stay the course should it come to that Will act Damn the consequences.

Margot folds the telegram again, the dozenth time at least along the same crease that now wears through the ink that forms Hannibal's desperate words.

There was no time to reply. She booked her ticket the day the message was received, packed her bags that afternoon.

The sea, at least, is calm, the ship cutting a white line through the endless navy blue of it as it heads towards a seemingly empty horizon. She wonders if her prospects in London are similarly empty, if the telegram had come too late, if she had.

Bringing Hannibal in had been something she had not anticipated to spread the breadth of so many years. He was not a soldier or a man of the force, he was a Count, a man she had met at a gala, who carried himself with poise and grace, and conversed with soft words and reason.

She had told him of her brother.

He had offered to help.

He had invested in the den, his own money and hers, had come to Mason with as much truth as lies on his lips and the young man had tested him until his own sick desires had been met, until he found as much a kindred spirit in the shell Hannibal presented as Margot had in the man himself.

She hopes she is not too late to see her friend, hopes the missive he had sent was not his last.

She wonders if this is a debt she will ever be able to repay. Wonders if he will let her.

There has always been a freedom to this form of travel. Loosed from obligations to tenants and to Tammany, from the Bowery and from Five Points, allowed to simply exist with no more responsibility than to sleep and to eat and to watch the sea spread before the ship.

There has been, before.

There is no such relief now.

Sleep is hard-won at best, with dutiful swigs of whiskey to spur it into uneasy agreement with the movement of the ocean. Food less welcoming, still, as Margot who has always had good sea legs - since her father used to bring her along once in a while when he took her brother out sailing - feels ill each day that passes further from America and closer to the lurching horror that England has become to her mind with every month that passed.

She tries to write. Tries to clarify her plans into lists. The amends she needs to make to the Chinese, to the Turks, for her brother's misdeeds. The amends she cannot make for the ones he has hurt - the littlest of them, lost and nameless, vanished to never be known again and here is where she falters. What can be done to ever repair that which cannot ever be repaired? A donation, perhaps, substantial - to an orphanage where they might have gone instead, to lessen the horrors that those too present.

Margot draws a breath and steadies her hand. And what to say to Hannibal, whose life has been all but lost - may have been entirely, she thinks with a rough swallow that suffices for tears she will not allow to flow, here or there or ever again.

So many lives destroyed because of a cruel, stupid boy.

It is a blessing that Margot looks nothing like her brother. She looks more like their father, with darker hair and a defined brow. She has his temperament as well, a good mind for business, negotiation, enough empathy to help not hinder.

Another sip of whiskey.

Another few hours of fitful sleep.

The world, Margot reminds herself, is largely unfair. In fact, almost entirely, she allows, the letters abandoned in favor of an attempt at eating, although that too is only picked at with a motivation made weighty by - well, guilt, for lack of a better word.

She should have killed him long ago, she considers with an aggressive stab into a not unpalatable serving of roasted root vegetables. Strangled him with her broken arm. Bit down when he graced her mouth with his inheritance. Rolled over and smothered him when they were still in the crib together.

But there were always ties for women like her - for all women, really. The relative comforts of her upbringing afforded at least the veneer of decency, a coat of paint across walls hollow with rot. First her name and the father who gave it to her, the mother wise enough to flee. Her brother bound her after that, determined to succeed his papa in business and brutality alike. Finally the law, or those who wore its mantel, until finally she found a way to twist within their expectations and still beckon them near enough to loosen the bindings and let her *move*.

No husband. No lovers but for a woman, once in a rare while. No more subjugation at the hands of men in any more ways than those with which she already has to contend. No more smiling and smoothing her skirts shyly.

Margot straightens and reaches for her wine. By her cleverness and wit, she has insisted on respect, from the Tigers roaming city hall to the lowest corner gang leader in Five Points, all won by bribery and blackmail and bravado. Mason is not half the man that any of them are, and she wishes it soothed her stomach more to know it.

She spends her most restless hours walking the ship's length in slow circles. Her hand draws up the salt damp splash of the sea as she runs it along the railing, and drips back to the sea once gathered.

There are two days yet to Southampton, and Margot will not sleep until she arrives.

It gathers like a sigh, a long, deep breath before its final release and it jerks Margot awake as the carriage continues over the cobblestones. The rain is familiar yet entirely foreign. Colder,

here, than New York, tasting bitter and smelling worse and yet when she holds her hand out the window the drops fall clean, leave no residue.

Perhaps it is her prejudice, then, entirely, and little to blame on the country itself.

It has been years since she had been here, with her father and Mason, and while Mason had fallen in love with the industry, the movement, the grittiness of the city, Margot had preferred the return trip home.

Now, she sees it as a place to save, a place taking a breath before the sigh, too scared, yet, to let it free.

She had written ahead, confirmed a room in a boarding house near enough to the den to oversee its progress, far enough not to be noticed.

He rarely leaves the den, even then with an escort, even then far enough to see the water, the boats, before returning. All errands are run by his boys, or by myself. He fears the city as much as he wishes to own it, he will not venture within it for fear of gathering its filth. The city is lucky that he doesn't leave his own behind within it.

Hannibal had once written lengthy letters, detailed and rich enough in imagery that she need only close her eyes to see the fumes and smell the snow. He wrote less the longer he stayed, some months no word at all. And less and less his words drew color in her mind, and more they darkened with heavy smoke and smears of resin.

They began to take the form of a confessional, gentled at first by explanations of having no contact but with those in the den, descriptions couched in metaphor and qualifiers.

Although I am aware that the home I once knew is lost to time and Russia, there are times my heart feels as though it will constrict to nothingness by the weight of homesickness. Will you visit?

Forgive me for being maudlin. Today was among the more difficult I have had, but I will persevere bearing you in mind, when there are no other lights to guide me.

Slowly, that faithful voice was drawn, as are all things near him, into the misery of Mason's own making.

The flowers grow, faraway lands and are plucked by faraway hands. Altered and treated by fire and chemical, purified into an even greater form. Sent across the oceans, protected as a precious thing grown and cherished, to a world those flowers were never meant to see. There they vanish, in vapor and smoke, forgotten as soon as they are consumed, as soon as the hand that destroyed them reaches for another, and another.

What once was a pleasant dalliance has now become often the only means I am able to draw myself from sleep in the morning. It is only by putting myself in such a state that I can stand to see him and not snap his neck, as I have snapped the knees and fingers of those who owe him. The sounds echo in the darkness of my thoughts, an existence made tolerable only by the

lack of illumination that would shine so harshly on all the wrongs I have done, seen, and allowed to transpire.

She had provided a candleflame flicker from only a distance, reasons both personal and business that did not need to be committed to something so permanent as paper. The young man brought to her by the Yard was chosen, as he had once written, not only for his stalwart loyalty and particular cleverness, but for his looks as well, as irresistible to Mason as any of his addictions, and Margot sighed relief to see them write to her about the other.

A comfort for them both, perhaps, one that she could not have foreseen.

He will hear her reasons now, if he still cares. If he has not been collapsed into nothingness, if he too has not been vanished by smoke and flame. If he still exists at all, let alone as the man who once charmed her so entirely that she briefly reconsidered her entire stance on malekind.

The room in which she stays is well-appointed, the proprietor a dark-haired young woman by the name of Bloom who - she informs Margot - is a friend to the Yard and any in their service. She is striking, truthfully, and in any other time or place Margot would be charmed by her, but as it is she merely settles. Unpacks her things and arranges for a telegraph to New York to alert Freddie of her whereabouts and relative well-being. Attempts to eat, and finally sleeps the night through.

Her messages sent the following morning receive no response, and yet she waits, fingers finding nervous pathways over the folds of her skirts until she forces them to still.

Perhaps Beverly has left already for America, their association brief and as shadowed as with Will Graham; no names, no promises, merely instruction and compensation. Passing on a message in a way Mason would be too blinded to see.

Perhaps her associates had gone as well, Jimmy returned to the shadows of London smog until once more his employer returns and his services are needed, Brian gone with her, his main connections in America herself - it is through him Margot had found Beverly.

Business meetings, Margot tells herself, that is all she is here to do, even as her pulse quickens with the thought of the culmination of so long spent in waiting, her and so many others, to finally bring this to an end that should have been reached long before now.

Hours pass and no one comes.

Perhaps she should have written ahead, perhaps should have come sooner.

She should have come sooner, she knows, she fears that her waiting for the right moment had allowed multiple others to slip her by.

Downstairs, the door is opened, murmured conversation and then footfalls on the stairs. Light, quick, she must have managed to contact Beverly in time. A good thing, too, she would need a mild-mannered meeting to allow her to mind to settle, her heart to slow.

There is no knock, there is just the sound of the door closing, and Margot turns to her visitor.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Will chokes down a sound, some aching tired animal noise that threatened to cross his lips, voice cracking raw as he shakes his head and buries his face back against his arms.

“I’ve nothing to say,” responds Will in a low murmur, as he has been for days. “I know nothing.”

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter: torture, threat to a minor

Will is not allowed to sleep.

This is made abundantly clear after his hands are bruised so badly banging against the door that he cannot feel his fingers. After his voice goes with a sudden silence, so raw from shouting, from sobbing, that even if he knew the answers to Mason’s relentless barrage of questions, he wouldn’t be able to speak them.

After he reminds himself that even if he did know and even if he could speak, he will die here in whatever agony Mason concocts for him before allowing a single word to be won from him.

Finally settling against the cellar floor, packed earth still cool despite the summer heat outside, Will curls in on himself and closes his eyes.

He finds himself in the lobby of the Savoy, or at least how he has always imagined it to be. There isn’t any reason to put them there, except that it’s as far from this as Will’s mind can stretch. Domed glass ceiling and gaslight chandeliers. A piano playing something gentle as they settle across from each other on well-appointed sofas, plush and soft as Will spreads his hand across it, and feels velvet upholstery rather than dirt. Drinks in hand, in thin, elegant glassware, far too rich for either of their tastes in truth but they have dressed to suit the moment, whatever whim has carried them here. Will tucks a finger beneath the high, pristinely white collar of his shirt and smiles to see Hannibal’s fingers move in sympathy against the glass. He follows the bend of his limbs against the armrests, tailored in a dark suit, very somber but in that way fitting in truth to who he is and in counterplay to who Will knows him not to be. Upwards, to the broad chest against which Will has rested his cheek and

pressed his mouth a thousand times, it must be by now, and to the long elegant curve of Hannibal's neck, upper higher yet to the hint of a smile and a bang, deafening, destroys him.

"This is not a vacation, my dear Will. You are not here to rest and recover."

Will jerks so hard he strikes his head against the wall, bites his lip to keep a cry from escaping him. Too much like a gunshot. Too close to what he is trying so hard to forget as he simultaneously forces into his memory.

It's been three days now, he thinks.

Somewhere at the back of his exhausted mind he remembers that after a week of this he will be dead. The brain can only take so much, and without rest it will disintegrate, shut down.

Will supposes it's a better way to go than being drowned or flogged.

He wonders if it will be painless.

He wonders why he still cares, why his body can still take pain and feels it when he is entirely numbed to everything else.

"You so ardently refuse my company." It's almost like a sigh of regret. "Very rude. Unspeakably. I do wish you would reconsider before I stop asking." The implication is clear enough and there is another shotgun-like strike to the door.

He flinches, and his eyes close. Will would laugh at the absurdity of it all if there were anything left in him to make those sorts of sounds. He recalls that it's rather like crying, laughing, but he won't do that either - not with Mason near enough to hear it, if he can help it. Tears spill to the dirt, when they come, refused to the man who would collect them with relish.

"Force it, then," Will mutters, his voice soft enough that it sounds as if it were a susurrus of movement rather than words.

"Are you alive in there?" comes the sigh, before there is a murmur to open the door, numerous locks opened with clanks and clatters of metal before it scrapes open.

Mason is head to toe in white, but for the ubiquitous black gloves that hide his fingers. These, Will notices immediately, unable to bring his eyes high enough to make out Masons' expression, but high enough that he sees the glass of water held in his hand.

It's been over a day, Will guesses, since he was last brought a cup of water at Mason's very vocal - '*very generous*' - insistence. He swallows roughly and turns his cheek against his arms, folded over his knees.

Another sigh, put-upon and drawn out.

"You really are making this more difficult for yourself, Will. You brought me to this, remember? I was happy to have a normal, honest conversation but -"

A pause, a shuffle as though Mason is digging the toes of his shoes against the dirt, like a bored child forced to apologize to a classmate in the playground for something he feels he did not do wrong. Will thinks how this is a very fitting metaphor, before there is a whisper of fabric and Mason crouches at his side, pristine clothes off the floor but balanced in an oddly graceful way beside Will's filthy form.

"You will talk to me, Will." He says.

Calm down.

"You will open up even if I have to physically do it to pull all your secrets out."

Please gets me nothing I want, Will. Heed me, here, that it won't do anything for you either.

"And you will eat even if I have to force it down your throat. And you will drink even if I give you no other choice but to fill your lungs instead of your stomach. I remember you didn't like that very much, last time."

Will's body hurts for the stuff, and he watches a bead condense and slip down the length of the glass to fall silent into the dirt. He chokes down a sound, some aching tired animal noise that threatened to cross his lips, voice cracking raw as he shakes his head and buries his face back against his arms.

"I've nothing to say," responds Will in a low murmur, as he has been for days. "I know nothing."

It is true, but equally, it is beside the point. He wouldn't tell Mason if the grass is green or the sky is blue, although for what Will knows of London neither may be true. Will shivers, despite the relative warmth. It's enough for him to wonder if perhaps his body is finally shutting down, part by part, inch by inch, to conserve what energy remains before the last flicker of flame is snuffed out for good.

What strength, then, Will can draw from imagining all those pieces growing numb, from remembering how once, very briefly, they were each and every one adored and made important, comes out in a coarse whisper as Mason shifts nearer.

"He trusted you. Listened, worked, sacrificed for *you*."

"That's on your head too," Mason bites back, a strange sharpness in his tone Will had not expected to hear. "Him."

The water is taken back, the man beside Will stands again, flexes his fingers in the gloves until they squeak with the motion.

"You know how many years Hannibal was my friend?" Mason asks. "Three. Three years, Will, he listened and advised and kept me company. He was interesting, he was loyal, as a good dog should be and then *you*. You show up with those eyes, that mouth that *moaned his name* and he left me. He left, Will, my good friend, my confidant, he *left me* for you."

Will will not cry, and sets his jaw in place, suddenly and intensely aware of how thin his skin feels, how dry his mouth, and how tired his eyes that seek only a resolute and unending stillness.

“Just end this, Mason.”

The sound of water being spilled onto the floor and Will feels the tiny drops fleck against his skin as he nearly sobs, has to restrain himself from crawling to the damp dirt to bury his face against it and suck whatever water he can get.

"I will end this when I feel his life has been repaid by the ruining of yours." A laugh then, short, "And when you tell me what I want, of course. Very important, Will, that you do not lie to me anymore. I am very patient but this has gone on quite long enough, don't you think so?"

The words ring Will to a new numbness entirely - *three years*. Three years Hannibal withstood this man, lived with him, advised and tolerated all nature of horrors the likes of which, over that period of time, Will cannot begin to imagine. Three years that Hannibal himself faded and withered, in wait for a partner, to see this through in whatever way intended.

A partner who would bring about his death, just by being there. Just as Mason insists.

Will shudders back a sob that won't come for lack of tears to fuel it and shakes his head softly.

“I’ve nothing to say. I know no-”

“Oh *God*,” groans Mason and these words pull Will’s eyes closed again, too often the exclamation that has cut him short, and the only time truly that what he needed to say mattered so much. “I am so tired of hearing that, Will, can you imagine trying to have a conversation with someone, and all they’ll say is the same thing over and over and over and it just makes you feel like doing something crazy? Can you imagine that?”

Rough fingers snatch Will’s hair and force his head to lift, red-ringed eyes flying wide open as he is made to look at Mason, pink-cheeked and fuming.

“Drink the water, Will, and then we’ll talk.”

His voice is softer, but still Will shakes his head and is shaken violently in turn by Mason’s grip.

“Drink the water. Will, drink the water. You are not allowed to die until I say you are. Drink the water, Will, now.”

Will sucks his lips between his teeth and closes his eyes, but hardly has time to shake his head before he is wrenched with a yelp towards the floor, the crown of his head nearly on it from the cruel bend he’s forced into by Mason’s hand, back arching and hands flying out to brace himself.

“Mason -”

“Oh, now you want to talk? Well, now I want you to drink the water.”

“Mason, pl- no, not again, I don’t *know anything!*”

He sighs as if told that the store was out of his favorite kind of sweet, a petulant, eye-rolling thing that Will watches in trembling disbelief. He tries, scrabbling, to push or pull himself away but is held fast even as one of Mason’s cronies steps into the room and pulls Will’s undershirt up from the hem to stretch across his face.

Will cannot take this again, it was hours before, until he was certain he’d broken something, permanently, would never be right again. He had hoped, as desperately as he’d ever wished for anything, that it would be the last time when still Will could not, would not speak, but now...

He shakes his head, or tries, but finds it held in place and instead tries not to feel the clatter of his heart, the deafening rush of pulse. Will tries to breathe but finds it already limited by the fabric stretched tight across his nose and mouth, forces himself to take a breath and does so just as the water spills across him.

Will is drowning.

The thin fabric flattens heavy across his mouth and nose, sucked straight by the breath he tried - is trying - to take and cannot find. His mind screams electric, he can feel his limbs moving somewhere far away and outside of his control as though to swim, to surface. The flat bottoms of shoes find his wrists, and the shirt is jerked away from his face again.

He drinks down air in shuddering gulps - not enough never enough - and tries to twist away, heaving his body against the goon’s feet that hold him in place.

“Drink the water, Will.”

Now Will does sob, soaked and shaking, and he knows that no matter what he does or says, it will not stop. Perhaps it would cease for now, perhaps, but to yield this would merely lengthen his time in this world entirely.

Will cannot abide that, and before he can shake his head again, Mason notes the set of his jaw and the shirt is pulled back over him.

“How about the whole thing this time?” Mason chirps, his voice muffled from the wet fabric, the blood rushing against Will’s ears. “Since you won’t drink it, I would hate for any of it to go to waste.”

Dripping into his mouth from the shirt into which it’s soaked, Will swallows a little of the water, he hopes unseen to Mason, but he is unable to stop himself from doing so, when his whole body hurts so badly for lacking. Lacking water, lacking sleep, lacking treatment for his still-cracked ribs and broken nose, lacking opium, and lacking the powder for which Will is ashamed to have wept as well, when he was able.

Lacking Hannibal, most, whose absence makes those others passable on the slow slide towards death.

"Or we could talk," Mason suggests again.

You could, Will thinks, and there is a strange buzzing in his head, another numbing thing, *you could talk and I could suffer*.

As it had been for days, weeks - had it been weeks? - with Mason getting nothing and Will finding his silence rewarded with pain. With torment. With the agonizing time to sit with himself and find his thoughts chasing each other through his mind in endless loops, around and around and around again, flashes of the last time he saw Hannibal, the last minute details that should not have mattered but do, because that is all he has, that and the memories of warm hands, warm lips, warm words, beating hearts -

The water feels almost warmer, this time, and Will wonders if he is genuinely drowning now, if his body has finally allowed itself to sink beneath consciousness properly, a mercy he finally feels deserving of, after so long struggling...

Three years.

The thought hits him square in the chest. He chokes, struggles, makes another of those pitiful sounds of an animal in pain and sobs, heaving, terrible things that pull at his lungs and bring the metal taste of blood with them.

"You are making such a mess," Mason laments, from somewhere that feels too close and too far at once. "You are filthy. Will. *Will*. I cannot abide it. You came to me pristine, now you're a wreck. Get him up."

The shoes disappear, hands too hot against Will's sensitive skin move to obey and Will is hauled up to kneel, staying up only because he is held, too weak otherwise for more than angry sobs and sniffing. The shirt slips past his lips and he gasps, head down to catch whatever air he can, unhindered, before a gloved hand presses to his cheek and he jerks.

"Do not. Do *not*." A slap, strangely gentle, and Will grits his teeth before the hand presses to his lips instead. "And don't spit, that would be very rude. You know how well I tolerate rudeness. Will. Look at me, Will."

"What could I say that would have me out of here alive?" Will seethes softly, raising his eyes up the stark white length of Mason to meet a severe frown.

I will not leave you in that den to die.

Without warning, lungs still tight from drowning on dry land, Will laughs.

He looks at Mason, and he laughs.

The man makes a thoughtful sound, and the frown eases into a slow smile. "I think death is very funny, too, Will - very funny. You should have seen the surprise on his face when I turned the gun on him instead. He was so *worried* for you."

Will's laugh shifts, tightens, becomes an ugly sob and he slips to his hands, knelt at Mason's feet as the man laughs instead.

"I want to know what she wanted from you," he sighs, amusement light in his voice. "Come on, Will, you're not stupid. Not *so* stupid, anyway. I want to know what she's planning, how you helped, and what you told her."

Fingers gouge the soil beneath them, and Will feels his body shake, earthquake tremors no more in his control than the sounds that wrench themselves past his lips.

"Katz?" Will ventures, and the slap this time is not nearly so kind. Hard enough to sting, to force sensation back into his body.

"Not *her*!" Mason spits, and the next slap sends Will back against the dirt where he lays, motionless, as Mason crouches low over him. "You know that I can keep this going, don't you? Months. Years. You will never see the sun again if I wish it. I will force you to eat and drink just to keep you alive. And I can make it far worse, dear lovely Will, I will make you forget his name. Forget everything you have ever known but this. But *me*."

A gloved hand presses hot against the curve of Will's back, down his shoulders, across the curl of his spine, further still to snare in the tattered pants he wears still.

"You sighed his name, didn't you? Spoke to him certainly much more than you speak to me. Maybe he was onto something with his methods to make you squeal."

Will shudders but doesn't move, doesn't get up, doesn't shift away. What does it matter? It's what Mason wanted. What Mason wants, Mason gets, that, at least, is a lesson Will learned very quickly.

He closes his eyes.

Behind them, he is in bed, warm sheets not rough earth, warm hands not unforgiving leather. He can feel Hannibal's smile when he presses a kiss to his shoulder, around the scar that no longer makes Will jerk when Hannibal touches it, down lower, it makes Will roll his shoulders, draws a smile to his lips as well, a flush over his cheeks, darkens his lips as he bites them -

"Maybe I've been going about this the wrong way." Mason's tone has dipped, not suggestive but curious, and that, to Will, is so much more frightening. "He did tell me that you would withstand inordinate amounts of pain and not speak. And in that, at least, you have not disappointed me, Will, you have been very good."

The praise is followed by a gentle tap to Will's head, like someone petting a dog if they had never seen a dog before.

"Good boys get rewarded, with me, always. I'm very fair. So you know what I'll do, Will? I'm going to let you out of here." Will can hear the nod without having to look up, and his entire body tenses at the words. "I'm going to get someone to draw you a bath, clean all that filth from you. Get you some new clothes. Perhaps even a pipe for the pain and then."

Mason stands, grin wide, hands spread to mirror it.

“Then we’ll talk again. Upstairs, like civilized people. How does that sound?”

For a long moment, Will doesn't move. Doesn't show a reaction at all, eyes wide and breath steady. He hates himself for being so easy - for being so broken that Mason has to offer so little to send Will's heart racing. But he's beaten against the door until his bones were nearly broken from it, torn his fingernails to jagged and bloody fragments trying to pull free the hinges, and Will knows that if there is ever a chance at escape that isn't being carried out dead, it is this.

To bow and to bend. To scrape and scavenge what little mercies Mason might be suddenly moved to offer. They may not appear again, and in his thought, Will's stomach rumbles audibly.

Will does not say please, but he does murmur, "I would appreciate the kindness."

Obedient and pliant and run cold through with fear. Mason does nothing without a price, and when Will still has not conjured up from the aether the answers the man seeks from him, he does not know how severe his wrath will come.

"Thank you, Mason."

“And already you’re talking like a civilized individual.” A click of his tongue another scrape of perfectly clean shoes against the packed dirt. “Perhaps I’ll start with this technique next time. Save us both so much effort. I am so *tired*, Will, do you have any idea? It exhausts me to play the antagonist, being forced into these positions, I hate doing it. That’s not who I *am*. I’m a very giving person. I like giving far more than receiving, it warms my soul.”

Another sigh and the man sweeps from the room, yelling commands in his broken attempt at Turkish, and Will is hauled up once more.

He isn’t sure if he had expected Mason’s word to be false or true, and which frightens him more when he sees that there has indeed been a bath drawn for him, with steaming sweet-smelling water, a towel and a bar of soap on a stool beside. He is not left alone, but he is not hindered in his movements, allowed to bathe himself - some small mercy.

Will takes great care to wash off the blood first, from his face, out of his hair. The water grows brown with it, no longer clear, almost matching the copper of the tub itself. It helps to obscure the bruises that soaping himself clean reveals, the swelling where bones have been left unset.

He thinks of Hannibal’s advice to cool the bruises before heating them, and sinks under the water long enough to feel his lungs burn before he surfaces.

He does not feel cleaner when he climbs out of the water, when he dries himself off and dons the clothes ‘thoughtfully’ provided him.

He feels like a failure, like a weak shell of a human being with every step he takes up the stairs to the room above. Three years Hannibal had survived Mason, and Will had broken at mere days. He keeps his steps as slow as the man behind him allows him to, determined to delay the inevitable longer and finding that slowly his body is simply shutting down to it all.

Shutting down emotion.

Shutting down fear.

Shutting down any self-preservation. Because this *is* self preservation, this is survival at its grittiest, cruellest core.

He thinks how Hannibal would have demanded he live, not waste away. Live with every fibre of his being that pulled and twisted and wanted to follow him instead.

Will opens the door.

Within it's darker, but marginally, the curtains drawn on an already late afternoon, but it's enough to see by, enough to hear the struggle before Will's eyes adjust enough to make out more than blurry shapes, one much smaller than the other, one a spectre, one a mouse cowering beneath it.

"Will! Good. I'm pleased. You took your time. Very gentlemanly of you, I appreciate that." Mason's voice sounds almost breathless, just on the edge of it, and Will finds he cannot step further into the room, he knows what he is intruding upon.

"I won't be long. It never is once I've subdued them. Please, take a seat. Wine, cocaine, cigarettes, whatever you like. Hannibal was always a smoker but, each to their own."

Will's mind sounds like the ocean, a steady rush of white noise that culminates in a rush drawing up thick from his belly. There is nothing with which to be sick there, nothing that would allow him to leave, and even as his body goes without his consent he is stopped by broad hands against his arms, as one of Mason's goons pushes him gently around again and closes the door behind.

"If you need anything, Will, anything at all - they'd be happy to bring it up for you. Just - don't you start - just let them know."

There is a soft, high keening cry from the bed, a sob snagging short with fear and Will feels it in echoes, resonance that forces him to sit with no exit, and with limbs that have begun to shake uncontrollably.

There are drugs enough here that he could snort them until he hears nothing, now or ever again. He could hurtle himself against the door in hopes that it would break, or stop this with enough noise, or -

Three years.

Will swallows, hard. Remembers palming coins to the orphans, or bits of exorbitant meals that went mostly uneaten. Remembers the way that Hannibal would look on them and appear

somehow younger, the creases easing from his brow, tension from his mouth as he would allow a gentle, secret smile with them.

"Mason," Will speaks, soft and clear, a firmness to his words as his fingers press against the desk. "Don't I owe you for your kindness?" The words are wretched on his tongue, burning like embers that he wants nothing more than to spit to the ground. "Before you spend it all so soon on this one."

It is as though he's watching himself - someone else's lilting words, honeyed sweet and shy, someone else's lips that twist in a soft pout of consternation, someone else's fingers that loop through a drying curl of hair.

A laugh, then, almost warm, almost human, if not for the depth of it, the underlying chill that sends Will's fingers gripping white against the desk.

"You truly underestimate my virility, Will. A bit unkind, but forgivable. You owe me many things. Things one night won't fix. But for the moment, you will tell me what I want to know - hold *still*."

A sharp yelp, a twist of his hand and Mason holds the boy bent painfully, arm extended and fingers trembling.

"If you move you will break it and that will not be my fault," Mason tells him, and the little body shivers. "So you're going to be still, and be good, and this nice man here is going to make sure your arm stays unbroken, aren't you, Will?"

Will's eyes dart to the struggling figure pinned beneath Mason, afraid and in pain but not in the shape he will be if Will allows this to continue. Mason was waiting for him, and Will feels a thing he hasn't felt in days, weeks, however long it's been - a brief and fleeting sensation of hope.

Hope that he can get the boy out unharmed.

Hope that perhaps his failure was not entirely for naught.

Hope that would Hannibal to somehow know, even where he is, that he would forgive Will this.

None before, none after.

Will shifts his head a little, curls damp against his skin, and suggests a smile softly as he speaks. "I can tell you something you don't know."

"You will," responds Mason with a blink, and a sharp laugh. "You *will* tell me, Will. Let's not forget we're here to discuss like ge-"

"Hannibal never had me," Will interjects, sliding a hand against his neck, holding his breath in the silence between them to force a color to his cheeks, beyond the pallor of days in darkness. "Not like that. In other ways, but I wouldn't let him - it's illegal."

His lip snares between his teeth and he sighs, almost a laugh if he weren't able to affect it with such hopelessness. "And since I'm so unlikely to survive this, it hardly matters now to hold onto that, does it?" He tosses his hair and swallows hard, watching Mason through his hair, and it isn't hard at all to make his voice quake - he has merely to think of Hannibal's soft assurances and gentle words, warm hands against his skin.

"Since I do owe you, and would like to stay alive. A negotiation," Will nearly whispers. "A trade."

Mason considers, Will can see the way his throat works as he runs the pros and cons through his mind, as he weighs up the value of taking Will over taking the boy beneath him over taking both. He could have both. He knows he could, Will knows he could. But there is something, the way Will's voice had wavered, perhaps the confession itself, has Mason's curiosity piqued, has his mind roiling with possibilities.

It's a split second decision but he releases the boy's hand, watches as the kid writhes to right himself and slip from the bed and to the floor on shaky legs. Will doesn't allow himself to think of how young he is, how helpless he is and how hopeless his existence here. He doesn't recognize him until the boy stumbles over and hugs his leg so tightly Will winces.

The boy who had walked him home, had offered half of his fig to Will so he wouldn't be hungry. A coin so he wouldn't be cold. He whispers something, words thick and heavy now with tears, before he runs to the door and opens it, letting it slap closed behind himself, gives Will just moments to realize he had called him *abi*.

Like Hannibal.

"Will."

An exhale, slow, and Will feels calm for the first time in days.

"Yes."

"Let me see you."

Will turns back, eyes clear, hands loose at his sides, curling gently against his trousers. He walks closer without being directed just to watch Mason's eyes darken with the heat of victory.

"You will be good."

"Yes."

"You will tell me what I want to know."

"Everything."

A smile then, brief, and for a moment entirely genuine.

"On your knees."

And without a word, Will goes.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

“Margot, do you know what that boy is? He is a gift. He carries within him something that should not be exploited but learned from. He is the epitome of humanity’s empathy, the epitome of its understanding and acceptance.”

“Thank you for passing on the letters.”

It’s the only thing she can think of to say, words suddenly dry in her mouth like ash, and just as meaningless when they pass her lips. Her only response in a hum, a soft sound, a sigh.

“He was happy to know someone was reading them.”

“I was,” Margot nods, presses her lips together, takes a step closer. “I have every one. No words were ever ignored.”

He is so far from the man she once knew that if it weren't for the piercing darkness of his eyes - and if not for the fact that he found her, here, and arrived unannounced - then she would not have recognized him on the street from any other worker. Once full features have been made wan, drawn into creases and furrows, a sickly pallor beneath the stubble of several days without a shave. His glasses are perched on his nose and he watches her, lips pursing into a thin line, and she stops her steps.

Margot's fingers stir nervous across her skirt and she forces them to still.

"I made arrangements to leave the moment I received your telegram. I left the following day," she insists, to what accusation she doesn't know, but after everything, there are so many due that it seems as reasonable a place to start as any.

A hesitation, brief, and she adds gently, "I am glad you are here. I was worried you would not be."

The shot, the ringing in his ears, words unfinished and choked on before that sound, that helpless noise that Hannibal wakes in a cold sweat hearing. He shakes his head.

“I’m not sure I have been for a very long time, Margot.” He does not elaborate, and he does not have to. He takes in the space with a cursory glance, used to committing quick facts to memory and dredging them up at will. He notes how she has yet to unpack, notes the nervous gestures, the tight body language that flits between the desire to step closer and the fear of the consequences.

With a sigh, Hannibal removes his glasses, takes up the hem of his shirt to wipe them clean, forces his shoulders to relax, his demeanor to calm to something more appropriate for accepting welcome company - late as it may be.

"I have telegraphed before, you did not come then," he notes.

"Hannibal," she begins, studying the way his fingers shake against the lenses of his glasses, how even still with pain - an existential pain far beyond the physical that too draws in his brows - there is some echo, distant, of the gentle, clever man to whom she was first so drawn.

She shakes her head gently and turns to walk back into the room, to grant him entrance to sit or stand as he pleases, and to share with him a cup of tea from the pot still steaming on her desk.

"There are few reasons, now, that feel sufficient as explanation. I will try to offer them to you, if you would hear them, but know that I feel they are pale in compare to the damage I see writ in you now."

Margot draws a breath through her nose and straightens, turning to carry the tea to the man.

"The police were not with us. It is a difficult thing to manage, so far away, and though I can certainly imagine the things of which Mason is capable, I assumed he would strike a stasis and persist there while I established myself enough to merit a meeting with the Yard." She finally exhales the sigh that still feels trapped beneath her corset, and deeper still beneath the stays of her ribs.

"These things take time, Hannibal."

A turn, then, sharp, a motion he had not been capable of before, never before so cruel with it, never before so feral. He blinks, it passes. Like a shift of season or scene.

It is frightening in its similarity to Mason's swings of emotion.

"Time," Hannibal starts, and his words are quiet, measured, before he forces another slow breath and accepts the cup with a gentle incline of his head. He does not sit.

"I trust you found a way to use it wisely." There is a dark sort of humor beneath the words, riding on them, gentled from something left unsaid. He is not frightening in his fury but he is filled with it, the exhaustion overflowing in the tremors of his hands, the twitches in his face. He looks older, so, so much older than three years warranted.

"Time is measured in something inhuman, Margot, it is measured with the passage of seasons and sighs, things humanity can touch on, conceptualize, but there is *nothing* about time that is merciful."

The movement is enough for Margot to pale, for her to nearly spill the tea held in her hands, and for her to feel a sudden surge of anger at her own reactions and the man who caused them - not the one in front of her, but the man who made him so.

She lingers for a moment longer, and then sets the tea aside. She will not allow herself to show her frustration, her own anguish and guilt at having done so much harm by way of her brother - it is but a shadow of the darkness in front of her now, and has no place here. Weakness has no place in her.

Not anymore.

"Nor is there anything that can regain it once lost," Margot acknowledges. "What you have lost here is beyond any recompense I could make to you, I know this, and you must forgive me if I will endeavor still to do so for as long as I am humanly able."

Careful fingers, kept in view of the man, come to rest against his shoulder, concern bleeding into her voice even as she tries to staunch the softness still inside her.

"Please. Sit. Tell me what you would, of yourself or him or my own short-comings, in whatever language suits you. I would hear it all. I must."

"You must," he repeats, voice softer, shoulder trembling a moment under her gentle hand before he brings his own up to rest against it, colder than hers despite them being pressed against the cup, held close to himself from the cold outside. He has not felt warmth in them since he'd skimmed his knuckles down Will's cheek, since he had splayed his fingers to feel Will kiss the tip of every single one.

The breath he releases is filled, weighted with so many he had held within.

"He would not have me in Will's place," he says carefully, finally allowing himself to sit, letting Margot take his hand in her small ones to hold him grounded. "He would not listen."

A pause, another breath, a flicker of eyelids that are as close to a blink as Hannibal will allow himself.

He can't remember when last he'd slept.

"Tell me," he starts, "why you did not let me release him. Tell me why in my stead that boy is suffering."

She does not patronize him with strokes of her thumb, with soft pats. Margot holds his hand - calloused and rough, his knuckles swollen so often that they have remained as such, may forever - in both of hers and keeps it cupped there, secure.

If she cannot provide any comfort to the rest of him, she will provide at least this, warming his hand in her own.

"Would he have gone?" she asks, her voice lowered, soothing steady tones. "He was hired to do just this - recommended to me by the Yard with as many commendations as one could fathom for this nature of work. I was told that he is stalwart and loyal and has never once been compromised, and we need someone there who is," she hesitates, eyes rolling towards the ceiling, "inside. Someone who can file the proper reports when all of this is done. We are doing this with the blessing of the authority and as such, T's must be crossed, I's dotted."

Margot shakes her head even still, frustration evident in the slight narrowing of her eyes, turned towards the window, towards the city. "Were this New York, Mason would have had his neck snapped and that would be the end of it, but England - London - has its own rules and still endeavors to maintain a façade of lawfulness."

Without releasing Hannibal's hand from one of hers, she reaches for a chair and brings it nearer, settling in across from him, almost knees to knees, and she brings his hand into her lap, cradling it warmly again.

"He is doing his job, Hannibal, and we must trust that he knows that. He was brought here to satisfy the Yard, and to distract from you. I would not risk you being found out as movement began to occur, and so a talented, clever, loyal, and young man was brought in to draw Mason's attention away from you. I should say that it has worked admirably," she sighs, sounding hardly pleased for it, but her tone factual.

For a moment, he is still, still as he had been when Margot had revealed to him Mason's true nature, still as he had been when he had offered to help. But there is something more beneath this stillness, something other that pulls at Margot like cold chills down her spine, that knowledge that the stillness is not of thought but of predation, of calculation and suppressed fear.

"Margot, do you know what that boy is?" Hannibal asks calmly, eyes up from their joined hands to her eyes, holding there, still as before, until she meets them. "He is a gift. He carries within him something that should not be exploited but learned from. He is the epitome of humanity's empathy, the epitome of its understanding and acceptance."

It is not violent, the motion of standing, he does not smash the cup or jerk his hand, but still Margot finds herself flinching when he stands, when he keeps his eyes on her.

"You brought him in to be bait, to the Devil himself, to secure yourself London." He shifts then, another nervous gesture as though to reach for a cigarette, a motion he aborts and rubs his palms down his waistcoat instead. "You sold him for your own skin you -" Eyes closed, brows furrowing and relaxing as Hannibal forces composure to himself, forces two steps away before he finally yells, a sound sharp and filled with as much anguish as anger. "*I left him* in that place, trusting you would heed me and set him free before it was too late!"

"If you do not know him to be dead yet, then it is not too late," Margot insists immediately, her hands clenched into fists against her skirts. She does not rise to meet him, but remains as she is, with her eyes fixed on the chair where Hannibal sat.

She draws a breath enough to fill her lungs, her jaw tight, voice terse, but steady, a staunch refusal to rise to his anger, to his shouts. It is not her right, even under these accusations, though she feels her patience stripped from her as though by lashes against her skin.

It has been a very long time since anyone has spoken to her in such a way, and reminding herself that it's due to her does little to ease her insult.

"I have heeded you, Hannibal. I am here. I do not care about *London*." Margot all but spits the word, her tone sharpening despite herself. "Bait, yes. I do not deny this. It is entirely why

he was brought, and I have never met the man to know him as well as you seem to." At this, she raises a brow, but continues. "But it was not for my skin. My skin was never on the line so directly, and of that I am keenly aware. Your skin *was*, Hannibal, and I would not lose you to Mason."

Finally Margot stands, tongue parting her lips on something like a laugh, joyless. "The intention was never to use him as a sacrifice. A distraction, loyal, that would enable you to act freely to make the necessary arrangements for us to move on Mason."

She raises her gaze to him, and asks, eyes narrowing with the barest twitch of muscle. "What happened between you, Hannibal?"

Soft fingers, that crooked smile that lit up Will's entire face with youth and pleasure, the sighs, the arching, the 'oh' that meant more to Hannibal than any other sound in the world.

He jerks his head, exhausted, brings a hand up to press the palm against his forehead, fingers splayed, loose.

"I had grown used to the void that surrounds him," he says softly, "One can adapt to not breathing, to a constant drowning. I grew used to the pipe and the powder, I grew used to the violence, the snap of bone and the silence just before the scream."

Will in the morning, warm and pliant and sleepy and contented...

He presses his palm harder to his head and draws a breath through gritted teeth.

"I was so close, Margot, to him, to the business, to the Turks, the Chinese, the drifters between - I knew his business better than he did, too far fallen to his smoke and his wine and his, his -"

Will had jerked at the gunshot, he had stayed absolutely still, absolutely silent, as Hannibal had watched Mason's face, watched the way he'd smiled, pressed a finger to his lips to hold Hannibal silent. For that moment, that one moment devoid of all sound that had stretched on like a starless night between them all...

"For three years I have witnessed... I have *done* -" He chokes on the word, hand down to sharply remove his glasses, press his fingers against his eyes until stars bloom behind them, sharp and pointed, gold and red and blue...

"He told me it had been my job." Hannibal's voice is strained, higher, pulled taut against vocal cords that have done nothing but silence his screams and his tears. "That had I wrought violence on him at Mason's command he would have been grateful it was me, and not another."

His hand falls away, throat working hard enough to click his jaw, just once, and Hannibal's lips part to breathe.

"He was the candle I turned to when I could not see yours," he says softly, blinking his eyes open, setting his glasses back against his nose, trembling harder now, flexing his fingers in

agitation until he loses the battle for stillness.

The lines in Hannibal's words are spaced so far apart that Margot could not more help to read between them than if there were no lines at all. The urgency, the hysteria rattling high and thin in Hannibal's missives, suddenly all falls into stark relief. Coded words and sentiments that circle the truth like faerie rings, obvious to those who know them, who have lived with them, as Margot has.

She doesn't speak the words that come to mind immediately. Bites her tongue and catches the slick satin of her skirts in her fingers, that childish gesture that she's never been able to break no matter how many times her papa swatted her hands and scolded, no matter how many times she snapped at herself about it.

"It was your job," Margot repeats in a soft overlay to the firm agreement with his words. "Was. Is no longer. You are relieved of it, after doing far above and beyond what I ever should have asked of you."

Resisting the urge to follow him, Margot returns to her chair and settles, elbow against the back of the seat and fingers pressed to the bridge of her nose.

"He was not wrong, Hannibal, if that was his attitude. For both of you, as much as it feels foul and ichorous to say such things. I could not have predicted this. Had I such abilities I would have arrived far sooner."

A laugh, sharp, and once more Margot tenses at the frightening similarity the sound pulls forward from her memories. It is not Hannibal, then, for that one moment. He is a terrifying *other*.

"You can't possibly understand that frustration," he says softly, and there is laughter under his words that is far from pleasant, far from happy. It is a hollow sound. "The willpower it took to stand by and *watch*. To let Mason peel them from their souls, those boys, bent and splayed and screaming for it to end."

He walks around, now, to make sure Margot can see him, that his words pull images behind her eyes as they should, as they had once done with quiet, composed words.

"Begging me to stop it and I *ignored* them, I left them there because it was my *job* to do so, it was my *job* to listen to his demands and meet them, my *job* to break the teeth he wanted broken, to seal the deals he wanted eased. And I did it well, oh, for three years of it I have earned the trust and respect of a demon who thinks himself king of Hell."

He barely takes a breath, one hand fisted at his side, the other pointing, sharp, towards Margot, an accusation when his words ring with desperation more than anger.

"For three years, I have collected dues and drowned myself in smoke until I became it. I am not a man, anymore, Mischa, I have entered hell in your stead as I promised to do. As it was my job to."

He stops, words cut short, and lips parted before Hannibal's eyes close slowly and he straightens, takes a slow breath through his nose and parts his lips with his tongue.

She hesitates, studies him at length and runs through her own awareness of any such name, finding none. He is unwell, she reminds herself, hardly standing but for the anger that forces him to do so. Anger that now he directs into this room, at her, and while not unjust in doing so, her eyes narrow.

"For years, I was one of those boys," Margot responds through her teeth, gritted into a snarl. "Tell me again that I do not understand - please, Hannibal, tell me what frustration and pain is, for surely I have never experienced it."

She does not regard him again, her fingers tapping against the desk in the silence of the room, the cobblestone streets a-clatter beneath her gaze from the window.

"You might have left. At any point, Hannibal, you might have left but you did not. I," she begins, and draws a sharp breath between her teeth, as though in pain. It holds scalding in her lungs until finally she releases it.

There will be no tears shed over Mason, Margot reminds herself. Never again.

"I did not intend for you to be here this long and - dammit," sighs Margot, lifting a hand to press against the bridge of her nose. "You are still who you know yourself to be. If you do not remember who that is, I do. I will remind you. I will drag you both out of this with my own hands if I must, but, god," she swears, and she drops to sit at the desk.

The graces are gone from her, the elegant restraint yielding to a frustration that seeps into every word and movement.

"Know that I never wanted this. This was never my intent, that it drag so long, but had I acted without the blessing of the Yard it would have been myself in the wrong and he protected by the law. I could not risk that, and there were sacrifices," she insists softly, although the word makes her nauseous. "But should all go well, there will be no more. It is done."

Hannibal stills, brings his hands palm to palm to rest his fingertips against his lips. When he lowers them, they are splayed in apology, wordless and sincere, before flexing to fists and pressing one against his mouth again.

He cannot take back what Margot suffered, cannot take back his words that had belittled it. No life was more important than another. And Mason has destroyed so many. For a moment longer they are silent, before Hannibal steps closer, one step, another, and gently takes her hand as she had taken his, bringing it to his lips.

"Have you what you need, now?" he asks softly, eyes up, watching for an answer as well as listening for one. He finds no hesitation there.

Margot's fingers curl against Hannibal's, a twitch of movement, and then a firm grip, holding fast to him who has always been more true to her than anyone else she has ever known.

"I do. Thanks to you," she responds, and hesitates. "And him." Their eyes meet and she tilts her head a little, before adding, as gently as she is able, "You care for him very much."

She lingers there a moment more, and then closes the distance between them to loop her arms around Hannibal's neck and hold him fast to her. Cheek against his hair, eyes closed, she does not let him go and a hand finds its way to his hair to stroke softly through the lank strands, unwashed and soft.

"You have done your job. More than I ever should have asked, you have done your job perfectly and I will spend the rest of my life in gratitude for it," she intones, brow furrowed, troubled. "I am sorry, Hannibal. I am sorry for all of this."

She withdraws a little, just enough to cup his face in her hands and force him to meet her eyes.

"I am not sorry for the good that both of you have done to ensure he is unable to ever touch another poppy or harm another little boy. And yours - your Will - we will bring him out as well. Heed me, Hannibal, I have never been faithless to you."

An incline of his head, slow, and Hannibal raises his eyes before he raises his chin, a slow motion, entirely predatory, entirely unlike Mason and everything like Hannibal.

"I remember every name," he says softly, "of every boy who cried for help and was unheard. I remember every deed. Every cruelty, every curse, every cheated deal and every broken bone. And I will make him remember them well."

A pause, and though Hannibal's hands still shake, when he reaches to adjust his cuffs he stands straighter, now, the Count again, and not the dog.

"Will you give me that?" he asks.

"An honor," she responds readily, inclining her head graciously and tucking a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "They have asked me to oversee that any actions taken see him left alive, for the sake of justice," she seethes the last word and shakes her head, regarding Hannibal steadily.

"Do what you will. Whatever must be done, to make him feel even a fraction of the pain he has so gleefully inflicted on others. If he does not survive it, I will smooth the friction myself, and gladly. We will save the courts undo work by administering justice in a far more effective manner."

She draws up tall, restored to the arch grace that keeps her so far removed from others, that has earned her such a cold and ruthless reputation. But in the corner of her eyes, a glint, a good humor towards dark things.

Every bit the sister to the brother who regards her now over his glasses, and catches the barest twitch of a smile before she smooths that, too.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Steady in, slow out, in, coughing on the exhale enough to shudder the bed beneath him. He wonders why his body can't just let go, why it has to hold, still, to a life he doesn't have a reason for anymore - or so the four walls of this room make him feel.

A sound, harsh, from below and Will jerks.

Will knows when he wakes only by the pain that accompanies it.

A stretch carries him off the dirtied mattress, back arching despite the twitch of muscles he feels spasm down every inch of his body, and a cough wracks itself rough from his lungs with such intensity that tears well in his eyes. The smell of food beside the bed is enough to pull a heave of nausea in him, and he reaches blindly groping beside the meat pie left for him for the pipe, eyes opening only when his fingers find the wooden nightstand instead.

The room filters into his vision, more familiar than his own home might once have been to him, and he blinks bleary to search for where it has been laid. His other fingers twist around the leather strap that keeps him tied to the bed, wrist rubbed raw from the shackle to which he has no key, and Will winces as he arches up onto his shoulders to shift higher on the bed, back against the headboard to take the strain from his hand.

If there have been others in Mason's bed besides Will in the unmeasured span of time that he's been there, he hasn't known it, and it would be difficult with Will held there as he is. Days have passed, maybe weeks, measured only in the steady shift of illumination that passes from one window to the next before finally ebbing back into darkness. It is noon, perhaps, sometime in the afternoon, and there is enough vision left in his eyes for him to see the pipe laid across Mason's desk rather than where it should be.

Will groans, his voice no more his own than any other part of him, and presses the darkness back into his eyes with shaking fingers.

He does this, sometimes. Withholds the balm that eases the endless pain of inhabiting this body in this place in order for Will to hurt beyond reason for Mason when he returns. If he could reach the desk, he could ease his own suffering for a time. If he could reach the desk, he could try to pen a letter, to let someone - anyone - know where he is. If he could reach the desk then he could reach the door and fling himself down the stairs and into the streets.

The thought pulls a laugh that quickly becomes another agonizing series of coughs, and Will allows himself to slide back down to lay. He looks down the length of his body, once strong and lithe and capable, and wonders if perhaps he is in the woods. Dappled shadows play

across his pallid frame as if leaves moving between Will and the sun, bruises bled beneath his skin in blossoming colors, purple as irises and golden as daisies, uneven circles bitten beneath a cruel mouth, spreads of color drawn by fists.

It is thin comfort, but the only one that remains, to know that by Will's suffering, others are spared. He reaches again to peel off a piece of the flaky pastry left for him, now cold, and bring it to swollen lips, knowing that he must eat to live, and he must live to suffer.

It is a thin comfort, and he draws in on himself with a shuddering moan to seek out some warmth beneath a blanket.

In the den below, it's strangely quiet, no sound of shuffling steps of whoever is awake making Mason something to eat, cleaning up the den. Will lies beneath the blankets with eyes barely open, unconsciousness too much a mercy to ask for, and catalogues his breathing.

Steady in, slow out, in, coughing on the exhale enough to shudder the bed beneath him.

He wonders why his body can't just let go, why it has to hold, still, to a life he doesn't have a reason for anymore - or so the four walls of this room make him feel.

A sound, harsh, from below and Will jerks.

Perhaps another misunderstanding with a shipment, perhaps one of the Turks ready to argue with Mason as his colleagues hold him back. The malcontent is easy to see and sense when one does not leave the den. As are phantoms.

Once in a while, Will hears his voice. Softened and accented, soothing and gentle, and it brings the unwelcome sting to his eyes, the unimaginable pressure to his chest. In those moments, Will apologizes, sobs his words to deaf ears or imagined ones.

The confessions don't ease his suffering, but the voice doesn't leave him either. Some days it's a comfort. Others it is a hurt so great Will wants to scream.

I will not leave you in that den to die.

The refrain comes as it always does when Will finds himself lucid, and he turns his face into the mattress to try and muffle it. Perhaps, Will considers, that is the bitter irony of it - that Hannibal has left him, and Will is not dead.

Perhaps that is how he can keep Hannibal's memory, still, by living, so as not make the man into a liar.

Will tugs against the shackle on his wrist, mindless of the scrape against skin still sticky and raw, listening to the rattle of metal, the rough slip of leather. He is several lengths too far away from being able to reach the pipe on the desk at even his furthest stretch, and so instead considers the metal glinting dull against his hand.

He wonders how quickly Mason would notice a broken hand, if Will made quick work of the fine bones therein to force it through the cuff.

There is another shout from beneath, harsh tones quickly spoken, and Will ceases the squeezing of his hand to listen. He cannot make out the voices in the back room beneath where he lays now, but it does not bode well for him. If Mason already took away the pipe from him, then it means that he woke up in a mood to start, wishing Will to suffer, wishing for him to ache and moan and cry for the man when he returns. If there are disputes, that much worse it will be for Will when Mason returns, and takes out his wrath on the young man strapped to his bed.

Tucking his head against his folded arm, Will wonders if he should eat, while he has an opportunity to do so, but his gorge rises at the thought of it.

More shouts, then silence, or close to it. The murmuring of multiple voices, one softer than the rest by tone only, not in conviction. Will wonders if they can lull him to sleep again, he doubts they will care if he screams.

So many screams from this room to carry free to the floor below, and no one lucid enough, or caring enough to answer them or stop them.

Will sighs.

If he concentrates hard enough, he can still feel the gentleness of Hannibal's hands against his hair, his skin, can feel the warm lips press soft words to him, smile, sigh, rub rough against his shoulder, his neck, his cheek...

There are footfalls on the stairs and Will sobs. Too soon. Too soon since waking, so few hours between his last torment and this one coming. He curls up, a tight ball of agony, and holds still and waits.

He does not bother to hide himself, lets the blankets remain half across his shoulders. Mason likes to look at him, Will knows, likes to see him bruised and bloody before taking him again. Will imagines, with some dark semblance of pride, that Mason admires Will for being able to last so long without begging for release, without doing anything more than taking his suffering in stride, and for still acting the part of the beautiful little boy who can withstand so much more than the others.

"Mason," Will keens softly as the keys rattle in the locks, and the door opens. Will shifts and turns onto his face to bury it against the mattress, some distant hope that perhaps he can smother himself like this.

He should have eaten. He won't have another opportunity again - *ungrateful*, Mason will sneer, and slap it away from him if he reaches for it.

"Mason," intones Will softly again, a wavering note, high and childlike. "Can I please have the pipe, Mason?" Expecting a harsh *no*, the stark silence that follows this request forces Will to lift his head, and turn a dark gaze back over his shoulder.

It must have finally happened, Will acknowledges to himself, perhaps in sleep, perhaps the night before when Mason had choked Will so hard he lost time. Perhaps then, he never actually woke again, and now, here -

"Will," Hannibal sighs, and to Will's ears it as loud as the gunshot that ended him.

The how, the why, the when doesn't matter, none of the gentle exclamations of disbelief in this spectre here are worth the breath it would take to speak them. Hannibal steps nearer and Will hesitates for only a moment, torn between pulling the blanket over the desolation of his body, and lunging for Hannibal.

He lunges, and the shackle rattles the bedframe as he jerks against it.

"Hannibal!" breathes Will, jerking mindlessly against his own wrist, legs and body splayed as he tries to heave himself free of the bed.

Hannibal steps closer, hands soothing over Will's thin body, over the trembling limbs as he sits and saves Will the agony of trying to pull himself free.

"Hush." The word is meaningless, pulls at Hannibal as harshly as it seems to against Will and the young man collapses against him, nuzzling furiously against his stomach, his chest, free hand gripping his clothes to hold him nearer even as Hannibal has no intention of moving away.

"I'm sorry, Hannibal, I'm sorry -"

The words are thick, stuttered and choked as Will finally curls himself entirely around Hannibal's form and sobs wrack his body with violent shudders.

And Hannibal's hands are just as soft against his bruises here as they always have been, just as gentle, just as caring and warm, and he whispers words Will doesn't understand or can't, and holds him close and presses kisses to his hair, dank and tangled with sweat.

"Breathe, Will, my darling boy, breathe for me. I'm right here."

There is relief in death, Will finally accepts. There is comfort in this release and had he known that Hannibal would come for him so quickly, Will might have let go far sooner than he did. A shiver shakes him and he drives his arms around Hannibal as much as he can, the shackle snapping taut against the headboard, face pressed to Hannibal's chest to feel the semblance of heartbeat there. Will's entire being aches beneath the gentle hands that skim warm and calloused against his cold skin, and his words are a hoarse rasp, tight in his throat.

"I tried," Will sobs softly. "I tried to hold on for as long as I can and I - I tried to keep him away from the boys. I'm sorry, Hannibal." His voice cracks and becomes nothing, no tears left to fuel the pain that wracks him now. "I held on for as long as I could for you. Made myself eat, and - and drink, and I don't know when it happened."

Will unsettles just enough to sling his free arm around Hannibal's neck and pull the man against him, foreheads pressed together so that Will, wild-eyed, can see him again, can meet his lips in shaking kisses, can press his fingers through Hannibal's hair, trembling.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get you out." The words are hardly spoken before Will's entire countenance contorts in a grimace and his eyes squeeze closed again. "I promised and I failed

and I'm so sorry, please, Hannibal."

Hannibal holds him close, one arm around Will's middle the other up against the headboard to keep his weight off of him as Will pulls him closer, peppers his face with desperate kisses and presses tiny breathy nonsensical words against his cheek.

He can feel his ribs against his fingers, can feel every breath that inflates Will's lungs and forces the ribs to spread. He is so fragile, here, bruised and battered and bloody, but he is not broken, he is not broken by the man who had set out to make him so.

"You are so strong, Will, you did so well," The words are automatic, now, with a much as Hannibal wants to comfort his Will, curl with him and soothe him to sleep, they haven't the time.

Margot had made her proposal to the Turks, had sent word to the Yard, and Mason would be back within moments from whatever had dragged him free to walk the streets today.

He regards the cruel fastening holding Will down and considers where the key could be. The desk, perhaps, on Mason's person, most likely. But he cannot leave Will like this again, not now he has held him and proved to himself he is safe.

"Will, look at me," he says, twists his head free from another kiss and lays Will down enough to grasp his face in his hands. "Will, I need you to remember where he put the key."

Will could almost laugh, bruise-darkened lips curving into a faint smile as he takes in the sight of Hannibal, how handsome he remains. How alive he still seems. This is not the bitter darkness that the Church is so assured waits for men like them - no, they fought valiantly as no others did against a true evil, and have been rewarded for it now.

"In his coat pocket. The smoking jacket. Can't you just take me with you?" he asks softly, fingertips cold as they follow the curves of Hannibal's face. Arching up despite the tearing pain from doing so, Will meets Hannibal's lips again, something his spirit stilled even as his body shakes and trembles.

Hannibal smiles, a genuine thing that tilts the corners of his eyes.

"Sweet boy, I cannot take you with me, so tethered." The words seem to fall on deaf ears.

"You didn't leave me," Will breathes, brushing his nose alongside Hannibal's own. "You came back for me."

Another kiss, to his forehead, brief. He wonders what poisons curl through Will's body, what powders and smoke to have him so pulled from reality. He does not allow himself to consider how much pain he must be in, as he is. It would tug too close at his heart, pull too near to nerves he cannot shelter.

He needs to do what he had promised, before he can take Will with him.

"I'm here," he promises, soft, ducks his head to kiss Will again, deep and gentle and reassuring.

"I'm here and you are with me, and once this is done we will go," he whispers, "to the country, to the stars and the fast flowing streams. But right now you must trust me, Will, you must trust me to end this, can you do that?"

Will seeks another kiss, his smile faint and fond and distant, lost inside himself but relieved that Hannibal has found him there. It is given, a soft, simple thing, before Hannibal moves to stand.

There is little enough time as it is.

"I need you think, Will," Hannibal suggests softly. "I need you to remember where he's gone today."

"He doesn't tell me," responds the younger man, a furrow setting in his brow as he pulls against the binding again to try and rise, to follow Hannibal. "I don't -"

"You do," insists Hannibal. "You do know. He leaves here rarely enough, what would motivate him to do so?"

Will jerks his wrist hard enough to feel the skin split, leaking warmth against his arm. This pulls his features into a frown, a sudden jog towards reality, pushing him forward in his own mind.

His eyes widen and he blinks at Hannibal, an instant of enraptured, stunned silence before he speaks, softly, quickly. "What day is it?"

"Tuesday."

"The docks. Because you were gone."

Hannibal shakes his head a little, stepping nearer again to work a hand through Will's hair. The young man shudders with such intensity that he nearly cries out. "Shipments arrive on Thursday," Hannibal insists, but Will hums, softly.

"Not from China. China is here on Tuesdays. The Turks are Thursdays. Why?"

"The key, Will."

"In his smoking jacket. He won't wear it out into the city, too dirty. Or cut the leather." Will hesitates, voice softer. "I tried to chew through it once." And it was only once, after Mason found him doing it.

The look Hannibal gives him radiates fondness, pride.

"Brave boy," he says, turning to seek in the heavy wardrobe for the jacket, the key within. He finds it easily enough, thanking whoever will listen for the ease of it. He unlocks the cuff, pulls Will up against himself and kisses his wrist, his fingers, wraps the blanket around him to stave off some of the shaking.

"I'm sorry I made you wait," he tells him. "I'm so sorry I left you here."

They need to go. Have to move, so Mason doesn't see, so it doesn't become a physical struggle, so Will will be spared that, at least, after the things he has had to suffer.

"We end it, today," he assures Will softly. "The assignment, the den, Mason, all of it. She is here to see it through then we can go, Will, anywhere you like."

The words are a flurry, a shock to hear in the place where Will finds himself now. That Mason could ever be ended, that this woman he has feared has come to find him - that they could ever leave, together, after...

Will tugs himself up closer to Hannibal, mindless of the pain by now, a constant pulse that never fades. Chest to chest now, Will loops his arms loosely over Hannibal's shoulders, the blanket wrapped around them both, and he breathes a little laugh.

"You're really here."

It is a childlike wonder, overwhelming Will into a sob and then silence as he tucks himself into Hannibal's arms for a moment more, to breathe him in, to feel their hearts find the other and to measure Hannibal's steady pulse beneath his lips.

His clothes were long ago taken from him, even those provided to him by Mason stripped and shredded. The blanket is held tighter, then, looped around his body that's grown so thin over his time here, and when he unfolds himself to stand it is with pain made manifest in the pallor that paints his face and in the gasps that tear from muscles worn to nothingness from overuse or disuse or both. Finally he grasps Hannibal's shoulder for support, expression contorted by the sensation of standing for the first time in a week? Two? It hardly matters now as Will turns his eyes towards the floor, and stretches his toes.

"Anywhere but here," Will insists finally, and adds, solemn. "Dreadful weather."

-

Downstairs it is as quiet as Will had wondered about up in bed. Though the den is rarely populated beyond its minimum during the day, someone is always there. Whether to clean the pipes for the coming evening or taking stock of the bar, bringing out new product or sleeping off the night on the now vacant couches.

Now, the den is almost a ghost town, no one there but the barman in deep discussion with a small woman who commands the room without even facing it. Will feels his shoulders straighten despite the pain it causes him, and Hannibal's arm around him tightens for support.

She turns, light eyes and angular features, almost catlike, and her expression softens from its sternness, marginally, and she steps towards Will.

"Will Graham." She holds out her hand, to shake, Will notes, not kiss. "I owe you a debt."

Embarrassment pinks color into Will's cheeks, a faded dusky shade from what it normally might be, but he swallows hard and inclines his head, grateful that the woman does not seem to notice that he is bruised, wan, naked but for the blanket wrapped all around him.

"You must be the woman I've heard so much about," Will responds softly, unable to keep a dry bitterness from flattening his words, just as much as he is unable to stop his hand from shaking as he extends it to shake hers. "You do not owe me," he murmurs. "No more than what was agreed upon for me to do the job."

She does not flinch from the acrid tone of his words, nor from the sight of him, bedraggled and beaten. Her chin lifts a little and a smile catches just the corner of her mouth.

"You'll forgive me if I disagree, and wish to pay my debt to you according to that," comes her gentle suggestion. Her eyes dart to Hannibal, his arm still tucked around the younger man to relieve some of the burden of standing, and just as much to relieve his own burden of what fate might have befallen Will in his absence.

"My name is Margot Verger," she finally says, and Will blinks a slow surprise at this. Countless pieces fall into place, Mason's accusations of his own blood betraying him, his spitting hatred of America, from which her accent clearly stems, the similarities in appearance that only go so far, and do not carry his madness into her manner.

"I see." Will shifts, settling the blanket around himself closer.

Margot looks between the two of them before inclining her head.

"I understand now may not be the best time for discussions and debriefing, but, Will, I must ask you for one thing more."

Will tenses, Hannibal can feel it against his side, the way the boy seems to almost seize up with the implication that he is not yet free, that his freedom was dangled and yanked back just as hard. He voices none of it, though, stands just as straight, carrying himself with as much dignity as has been allowed him.

Hannibal could kiss him for it.

"Scotland Yard will need to know what has gone on here," Margot continues when there seems to be no answer forthcoming from Will. "They'll need confirmation that the operation was one with their involvement, and a collaboration of sorts, so that Mason can be taken to their justice where his money will not save him."

"Then it is better we save our own debriefing for after," Will agrees. "The less I know of what you both know, the more reliable my own report." He presses a hand to his face, a murmured apology as he does so, and leans deeper into Hannibal. The man moves with him, and does not bring him to a barstool but rather to one of the couches.

Will's brow furrows but he does not make a sound as he settles, discomfort evident and unvoiced. Despite his appearance, his weakness in standing for even that long, he is once again the man who first sat for games of whist with Hannibal in the public house. Distant and withdrawn into his own duty, polite and observant, every bit the professional who knows what his work entails.

What comes later, once that burden too is relieved from his shoulders, cannot yet be known, but he holds himself together now as best he can, and begs Margot's forgiveness for being seated again before he sighs.

"I will remain, then, and wait for them," he states. "I am evidence enough at this point, but I certainly can direct them to much more within the den itself."

He glances towards Hannibal, expression softening just perceptibly, and then towards Margot. "Will you let them take him? Or will he have... *fled* by then?"

"They will take him," Hannibal responds, tone soft, gentled not because it must be, for Will's benefit, but because it always seems to around him. "Perhaps by that point he will want them to."

The suggestion is so faint, so soft, that it takes Will a moment, and by then Hannibal has turned away again, taken Margot's hand to bring her knuckles to his lips to kiss, a parting of ways, for them, in this particular endeavor, and Will resolves to ask Hannibal about her, about them, about all of this, when his mind can process more than how much pain he's in, and how close he is once more to the pipe to smoke, should he reach.

He doesn't.

"Will," he turns back, Hannibal's words gentle, coaxing, calling him back from where his mind would take him.

"Wait for me at the boarding house, I will come."

After, is implied.

Will nods, once, and forces a breath to fill his lungs. A quick glance to the rest of the room, and then with a pale smile, he adds gently, "Be careful. I do not wish to lose you again."

The small smile that Hannibal returns to him is worth it all, and Will watches as he goes, and the space in which he stood for long minutes after he has left. Finally he starts to rise, attention lingering briefly on the pipes instead, and the pull he feels is so fierce it forces him to clench his hands to stop the tremors of pain without the poppy to ease it.

"Are you secure, then, Ms. Verger? It is best to tend to any remaining business before the Yard arrives. Their tendency is to be quite heavy-footed, and heavier-handed during investigations, though certainly they are still a lighter touch than the Metropolitan."

"Quite," she agrees, smile soft, eyes softer still as she watches him, younger than she had expected him to be, stronger than any person should need to be.

He tries to ignore the fact that he is so exposed, and in reality, it is far less exposed than he had been in many, many days. Will's eyes meet hers briefly before drifting just past, distant.

"Thank you," Will says, "for relieving Hannibal of this."

Margot considers him a moment, this man she had never met before now, this man she knew only through letters and the gentle words within, the way he had implored, from the very first, to take Hannibal away.

“Thank you for saving him,” she responds.

Will inclines his head just a touch, his smile slight and sad. "If only it were so easy as that," he suggests, drawing the blankets tighter as he shuffles towards the couch to wait. "I will do my best to see it through."

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

"You know," Mason declares, "Papa always did say I had his nose. Not anymore, I guess!" Another wild laugh breaks the silence that has fallen over those watching, nausea turning many heads, fascination keeping others still. Margot's attention does not waver.

It's all she can do not to smile as he passes.

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you to everyone who has read, commented, kudos-ed and bookmarked and shared. It means the world to us.

More sentiment at the bottom, loves!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack Crawford is not a man to ask stupid questions. He allows Will to speak. He allows Will's injuries to speak for him. He does not interrupt, he does not take notes. The rest of his team scour the den while Will holds the blanket close and does not meet Jack's eyes, and Jack's eyes never leave Will's face.

When they find Mason Verger, Jack does not comment on the level of damage done him, he does not condemn the man that did that to him. He does not see Mason Verger as human. He still authorizes an ambulance and puts the handcuffs on the man himself.

"A man of justice, finally," Mason sighs as he's hefted from the floor. The words are wet-sounding and slurred, but there has been no damage to his tongue that would prevent him from speaking. From giving testimony. From crying out and demanding even past the gaping hole that remains where his lower face once was.

"If there weren't a dozen other officers here," Jack responds, "I wouldn't feel very just. You'll be lucky to find your way to an institution."

Mason stumbles as he's forced through the door, laughing loud, maddened by the drugs forced into his system to ensure he did not die beneath the knife, given to Mason himself in an instant of inspiration.

"You know," Mason declares, "Papa always did say I had his nose. Not anymore, I guess!" Another wild laugh breaks the silence that has fallen over those watching, nausea turning many heads, fascination keeping others still. Margot's attention does not waver.

It's all she can do not to smile as he passes.

Her work, in the end, had been surprisingly easy after Will Graham's report to Jack. All the necessary pieces put into place long ago now slowly clicking into proper formation through rusted hinges. She wonders if Mason recognized her as he was led past, makes a note to visit him when he is securely held down by wet canvas, when his mind is as lucid as it ever has been, when the pain is real for him.

She watches the boys, after Mason is led away, who watched him just as curiously as she had been. Two of them, she wonders of how many. One is older, or at least taller, with light eyes and darker skin. The other has rounder features. She doesn't guess at their ages, she doesn't want to. The smaller boy catches her looking and offers a bright grin, and she finds herself smiling back.

A donation to the orphanages, certainly, but these two boys would not be sent to them.

They whisper between themselves, and the taller boy gives the smaller a little push. There is resistance, wide-eyed and shy, before he ducks back again and they both send Margot another long look. Appraisal, quick judgments made by boys whose wariness is both wise and far too old for ones so young, and finally the older of the two takes the other by the hand and ushers them both closer.

Heavily accented, but with a cocky, crooked grin, he nudges the younger boy again even as he ducks behind. "He says you're very pretty."

Margot blinks, a little taken aback, but returns a curious smile after a moment more.

"Tell him thank you," she responds, surprised by how gentle her own tone can be as she does, before ducking a little lower, willing to be a distraction from the police swarming over what must, until now, have been their home. "What are your names?"

"Tariq," declares the older boy, before glancing to the smaller one still hiding half-behind him. "This is Metin."

She knows better than to ask where their parents are - knows better than to ask many things to which she'd rather not know the answer, and assuredly they'd rather not share. "Metin," she repeats, and the boy's grin appears sudden and bright.

The sound of the door opening draws the attention of the three and Margot straightens again, smoothing out her dress with both hands as she catches Hannibal's eyes and inclines her head.

"*Abi!*" Tariq is gone before Metin can react, and Margot reaches for the little one without thinking, an arm settled lightly over him, a soft sigh of surprise as he wraps his arms suddenly around her.

Hannibal watches, drops gracefully into a crouch before the younger boy can envelope him in a hug as Metin has Margot, but he finds little arms around his neck instead, and rapid Turkish against his ear that he lets flow until the boy sighs himself to silence and holds on.

Fearing he was dead when he stopped coming to the club, fearing that without him Tariq would be as well. He settles his cleaner hand against the boy's shoulders and murmurs his name to make the boy pull back and look at him.

"You should go with her," he tells him, eyes flicking to Margot even as the boy shakes his head, brows furrowed, adamant. "She is kind, she will take care of you."

"I can take care of me."

Hannibal's eyes wrinkle at the corners, amused and proud both.

"You can," he tells him, "but not here. It is a bad place for you here, she will take you to one better."

"Will you come?"

"No."

"Then no." The boy crosses his arms and Hannibal's smile manifests into a softer thing against his lips. He sighs, ducks his head, exhausted from hurting the man who had once hurt Tariq, had hurt Will and Metin and Can and the endless parade of boys into the den month after month. He wants nothing more than to sleep. To gather Will to him and feel his heart beat against him.

"What's to be done with you," he sighs again, hand up to rub his eyes before setting it to rest against his knee and pushing himself to stand.

"Go with her for now. Tariq." His tone turns stern for just a moment. "For now. She will give you food and a place to sleep. I will come tomorrow."

A look of doubt, of genuine worry, before the boy nods, just once, and Hannibal runs a hand through his messy hair.

"You'd best translate for *kumru* before he talks her to death with compliments," he murmurs, and Tariq grins.

Hannibal spares Margot only a glance before passing her and the boys to leave, feet carrying him out of the den, down the familiar cobbled streets.

Will is asleep already when Hannibal knocks against his door. A long stirring, an aching murmur of pain from inside, before the locks rattle free and Will opens the door.

He is snared in arms, strong and gentle all at once, before the door even closes, and Will lets himself be held with little more he could want more in the world than to feel Hannibal so near again. He has bathed, washed the filth from the outside of himself in hopes it would

alleviate the grime within, but only now, pressed so close that he can feel Hannibal's heart steady and faithful against his own, does that wash away, too.

"Welcome home," Will murmurs, and breathless adds, "I missed you. God, Hannibal - the entire world stopped."

Hannibal works soft fingers into Will's hair, uncaring for the blood on his hands, mindful only of the gentle smile that Will offers, shared in kind as they kiss.

"I'm here," Hannibal tells him softly. "I'm here, and it can turn again."

Chapter End Notes

First up: thank you for reading! (again) We will always say it, because it always means a lot to us. We still squeal and wriggle happily whenever a new comment pops up, we love discussing theories and ideas with you, we love holding conversations that lead to other ideas and more prompts, we adore it, so a huge, huge thank you for your support throughout - it is invaluable and we cannot thank you enough.

Next, a note from Whiskey, that Blood did the most spectacular job on Will, here, and Margot. Margot came alive with her words, and became a character much deeper and much prouder than we anticipated she could be. And Will... well, you read the story, I think it speaks for itself. I am so blessed to write with her every day, and we *do* write every day, thousands upon thousands of words every day. My second full-time job that I adore and will never get tired of :)

And from Blood, who refuses to be noted without Whiskey in tow. Really, refuses to do much of anything at this point without Whiskey in tow. Her Hannibal broke my heart (and yours, if the comments are anything to go by) time and again - a different facet of the character than we normally see, rendered beautifully. My characters would have been nothing without hers - Hannibal's heart, and Mason's brutal hand - and I'm sure the sentiment is likewise. We're constantly in a game of "WHAT DID YOU JUST WRITE" and feeling as though we've got to sweat to keep up with how highly we regard the other's skill, and hopefully it continues to yield many more stories for you all to enjoy. Thank you everyone, always, for joining us.

End Notes

Apparently:

- there was not a secret police in the era we described. Our thoughts? It's secret, so obviously there is no record of it.
- there were not many (if any) opium rings in London, despite what the dreadfuls described. Once more, we say pah to history in this case.

Also of interest:

- Blood took hold of Will in this, and Whiskey wrote for Hannibal
- we shared Mason. We have an ever-lingering love of Mason. He has invaded our minds and our very beings. He has not yet reached our hearts.

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by [sku7314977](#)

[Odalysium](#) by [drinkbloodlikewine](#), [whiskeyandspite](#)

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